United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.* If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Billings First Congregational Church
Other names/site number: Billings First Church, First Congregational United Church of Christ
Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

2. Location

Street & number: 310 North 27th Street
City or town: Billings State: Montana County: Yellowstone
Not For Publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this _X_ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property _X_ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ **national** ___ **statewide** _X_ **local**

Applicable National Register Criteria:

_X_ **A** ___ **B** _X_ **C** ___ **D**

_____	10/15/2025
Signature of certifying official/Title:	**Date**
_____	
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

_____	_____
Signature of commenting official:	**Date**
_____	_____
Title:	**State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government**

Billings First Congregational Church | Yellowstone County, MT
Name of Property | County and State

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register

___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register

___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:) _____

_____ _____

Signature of the Keeper **Date of Action**

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property

Private:	X
Public – Local	
Public – State	
Public – Federal	

Category of Property

Building(s)	X
District	
Site	
Structure	
Object	

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
1	1	sites
		structures
		objects
2	1	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

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6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

RELIGION / Religious Facility

Current Functions

RELIGION / Religious Facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

MODERN MOVEMENT / Midcentury Modern
LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS / Colonial Revival

Materials

Principal exterior materials of the property:

BRICK, STONE/limestone/cast stone, GLASS, CONCRETE

Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph

Billings First Congregational Church, also known as First Church, stands as a notable landmark along a primary corridor through downtown Billings, Montana. Rev. Benjamin F. Shuart founded the church in May 1882 and oversaw the construction of a makeshift building on a donated plot of land set aside for the community's first church. The Minnesota and Montana Land and Improvement Company established the city of Billings only two months earlier on the proposed Northern Pacific Railway route, which traced the Yellowstone River westward through Montana Territory. Billings, named for the railroad's former president, Frederick H. Billings, quickly earned the nickname of the "Magic City" due to its explosive growth following the arrival of the railroad in August 1882. The Congregational church served as the only house of worship in the rapidly growing railroad town for several years and has had a lasting impact on the community's development from a frontier outpost into the state's largest city and a vital commercial, industrial, and transportation hub.

In the nearly 150 years since its founding, the church has undergone major transformations, mirroring the changing landscape of the city itself. Rev. Shuart held services in the roughly built wooden church until a brick Tudor Revival style building was completed in November 1883. A 1928 two-story Colonial Revival addition extended the church to the north, increasing the seating capacity of the 1883 sanctuary and adding classroom spaces and a parish house. A two-story Modern vernacular education wing, completed in 1951, further expanded the building to the north and west. In 1957, a Midcentury Modern addition, consisting of a sanctuary, narthex, and administrative offices, replaced the 1883 church and the portion of the 1928 addition south of the parish house. Today, the church consists of the 1957 addition, the 1951 education wing, and the 1928 parish house and retains a high level of integrity. Shuart Memorial Park flanks the church to the north, and the noncontributing Intertribal Community Park flanks it to the south. Located at 310 North 27th Street, the church occupies a prominent corner in the city's civic core, across from the historic Chamber of Commerce Building, the Yellowstone County Courthouse, and the former City Hall.

Narrative Description

The Billings Original Townsite grid follows the Northern Pacific Railway's orientation with avenues running parallel to the tracks from the southwest to the northeast. Streets run perpendicular to the railroad right-of-way, from southeast to northwest. For ease of description, the author describes the First Congregational Church's southeast elevation as the south, the northeast as the east, northwest as north, and southwest as west.

The Minnesota and Montana Land and Improvement Company provided the land for the original Congregational church in Billings.[1] In June 1882, the church trustees contracted with a Mr. Sawyer to construct a simple, 20-foot by 32-foot, wood-frame, one-story, gable-front church to provide temporary worship space.[2] The Frederick and Julia Billings family contributed a $10,000 grant mortgage toward the construction of a permanent, more stately edifice.[3] The substantial, 1883 brick church designed by Plant and Whitney of Minneapolis presented a more elaborate design: its one- and half stories, gabled and hipped wings, broad eaves, fanciful dormers, and tall steeple tower conveyed its ecclesiastical Tudor Revival style. Polychromatic red brick additions enlarged the 1883 church in 1928 and 1951, and a new wing replaced the entirety of the 1883 construction in 1957.

In 1928, the congregation completed an H-shaped, Colonial Revival addition that extended the 1883 church to the north consisting of paired two-story, gable-front edifices connected by a two-story, cupolaed, side-gabled hyphen. The south bay lengthened the 1883 church's north wing, and the north bay functioned as the parish house. The rectangular parish house still stands and provides a parlor, library, kitchen, classrooms, offices, and assembly spaces. Designed by architects McIver and Cohagen and constructed by Gagnon and Company, its front-gable east elevation constitutes the north bay of the building's façade adjacent to North 27th Street. Its Colonial Revival hallmarks include: a moderately pitched gable roof; gable end returns; a coped cornice; boxed eaves; a pair of corbelled interior chimneys at each end of the gable peak; symmetrically placed, multi-light, double-hung windows; flat-arched lintels with cast concrete keystones; and a round attic window.

A sympathetic Modern addition perpendicular to the parish house's west elevation runs along the alley that forms the parcel's west boundary. Designed by Cushing Terrell and completed in 1951 by R. I. Riedesel Construction, this two-story, brick addition, called the education wing, connects with the parish house's west wall via a short extension, creating an irregular footprint. The addition extends to the north beyond the parish house width, forming an ell that defines Shuart Memorial Park. The addition features a flat roof, shallow concrete-capped parapet, evenly spaced window openings with simple concrete sills, and a daylight basement with a concrete wall foundation. Generally, modern paired, vinyl-clad, one-light casements fill the original openings. A small, one-

[1] Memorial Committee. *First Congregational United Church of Christ: Our First One Hundred Years*. Billings, MT: First Congregational United Church of Christ, 1982, p. 56; "City's First Church Will Burn Mortgage," *Billings Gazette*, November 25, 1967, p. 18. https://www.newspapers.com/image/414834861/

[2] "Religious," *Billings Gazette*, June 22, 1882, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409422457/; "Religious," *Billings Gazette*, July 20, 1882, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409429232/

[3] "Billings," *Billings Gazette*, June 1, 1882, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408881528/; "Hon. Frederick Billings," *Daily* Herald, September 6, 1883, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/419557413/

story, metal-framed, glass-enclosed, flat-roofed vestibule shields the entry within the ell at the north side of the parish house and education wing intersection.[4]

The 1957 construction occupies the south side of the parcel, attached to both the parish house's and the education wing's south elevations. Conceptualized and drawn by Orr Pickering and Associates and built by COP Construction, the dynamic edifice serves as a beautiful example of Modern ecclesiastical design. Vertical window channels, multiple geometric block masses, simple brickwork, concrete panels, screens, stained glass, and asymmetrically divided steel-frame windows envelop the church, including the narthex and nave, where driftwood gray oak paneling, delicate tile, extruded aluminum trims and frames, and colored and etched glass combine within a deceptively complex and beautiful interior.

In 1970, the congregation converted the north lawn, vacant since the removal of the 1914 parsonage in 1967, into a park with a gravel playground occupying its southern half. The park, a contributing site, memorializes the church's first minister, Rev. Benjamin F. Shuart, and commemorates the church's founding on May 24, 1882. A nonpermanent modern, eight-foot by eight-foot, wood-framed storage shed with an asphalt-shingled gambrel roof sits in the northwest corner of the park and is not included in the resource count.

A second park occupies the lawn south of the church. Dedicated in 2020, the Intertribal Community Park and a series of four mixed media sculptures by artist Sherri Cornett honor the Indigenous peoples on whose traditional lands the church now stands.

Billings First Congregational Church (counted as one contributing building)

1928 Parish House

As described above, the 1928 Colonial Revival parish house stands two stories high atop a daylight basement. Asphalt shingles cover the front-gabled roof, which features interior chimneys that rise from either side of the ridgeline at the edge of the gable ends. The parish house's east and north elevations remain exposed, while additions cover nearly all of the west and south elevations. Only a portion of the second story's south elevation remains visible within a lightwell, and only the west gable-end chimneys remain visible above the 1951 education wing's roofline. The 1928 construction's concrete wall foundation rises two and one-half feet above the ground level, where it meets a soldier-coursed brick water table. Both the east and north elevations display stretcher-bond coursed veneer walls punctuated by single window openings at the basement, first, and second stories.

East (front) elevation

The 1928 construction faces east to North 27th Street, and its façade contains two window openings spaced evenly across each story, plus a round attic window in the east gable end. Rowlock bricks and a single cast concrete keystone centered at the top, bottom, and sides trim the nine-light wood frame, fixed, round window. Cast concrete keystones between soldiered brick

[4] "$100,000 Campaign to Construct Wing on First Church in Billings Is Scheduled by Congregationalists," *Billings Gazette*, April 9, 1950, p. 23. https://www.newspapers.com/image/412681599/; "Steel Erected in Church Unit," *Billings Gazette*, February 25, 1951, p. 9. https://www.newspapers.com/image/412773554/

voussoirs form the flat arches that serve as lintels at the first and second levels. These windows also exhibit dimensional wood sills that protrude slightly from the wall plane. Originally, single six-over-six double-hung windows glazed with polished wire plate glass adorned each of the first and second-story openings, while shorter, wider, vertically divided four-over-fours occupied the basement level. Today, modern vinyl-clad, single-hung windows with false muntins recall the original divided styles. A metal bar panel protects each basement window.

North (side) elevation

The parish house's north side also displays evenly spaced, single window openings across its basement, first, and second stories. The openings at either end of each story sit apart from the five across the center, and, at the first story, these outside windows display the flat arch design seen on the east elevation. A soldier-coursed band functions as a continuous lintel across the first story's five center openings. Rowlock lintels top the basement's individual windows, while the second-story window openings meet the coped cornice line. Wood sills, similar to those on the east elevation, support the first and second-story window openings.

Aggregate concrete steps lead up a brick stoop to a single, one-light transomed, flush wooden entry door within the first story's second-from-west opening. Framed with metal tube railings, this stoop obscures the basement level's second-from-west window opening.

South (side) elevation

Approximately 40 feet of the 1928 south elevation's second story remains unobscured by subsequent additions. This wall looks over the roof of the one-story interior portion of the 1957 addition's office suite bay, allowing for four original window openings, filled with modern replacements, to flood the upper story with light.

Interior

The 1928 parish house's interior includes three levels, all with plaster wall treatments and rooms accessed by historic paneled wood doors. The basement contains a central hall, running east-west, flanked by three classrooms on the north side and two classrooms and a Historical Room on the south side, and a full-width room at the east end with an east wall fireplace. The basement rooms have poured concrete slab floors covered in linoleum tiles.

From east to west, the 1928 building's first floor interior houses a parlor, library, small kitchen, and an office. An original fireplace accents the easternmost room's east wall. The second-story floorplan includes two large rooms to the east, formerly an open dining room, and a large kitchen with the original cabinets and dumbwaiter shaft to the west. These rooms feature drop ceilings and original plaster walls, paneled wood doors, and maple flooring.

1951 Education Wing

Designed by Billings architects Cushing Terrell, the 1951 education wing runs north to south along the property's west boundary. Aligned with the alley parallel to and between North 27th Street and North Broadway, the two-story addition attaches to the 1928 construction's west elevation via a shallow two-story hyphen. The hyphen and a bump-in where the addition meets the 1957 addition disrupts the addition's otherwise long rectangular footprint. A concrete cap tops a short, flat parapet

wall that surrounds the addition's flat roof. Rising from the west side, off-center to the south, a square interior chimney punctuates the roof.

Faced with polychromatic red brick that matches the rest of the building, the east, north, and west elevations' exterior walls display minimal ornamentation. The addition's concrete wall foundation meets a soldier-coursed brick water table approximately two feet above ground level. Concrete-sills protrude from the window openings, which, unless otherwise noted below, contain vinyl-clad casements at the first and second stories and one-light awnings at the basement. A one-story, flat-roofed, steel-framed glass vestibule lodged within the ell at the hyphen and east elevation juncture provides shelter to an entry door. A long, curbed lightwell protects and provides illumination to the basement windows along the west elevation.

East (front) elevation

Two sets of two widely spaced window openings with vinyl-clad replacement windows appear in line across the basement, first, and second stories. The basement windows measure wider than they do high and contain one-light awnings. At the first story, full-sized casement pairs fill the three south openings, and the northernmost opening holds a narrower one-light casement north of a fixed two-light sash. An air conditioner and plywood infill the smaller, upper fixed sash. At the second story, both window styles present at the first story also appear: paired casements within the second and fourth openings from the south, and casement-and-fixed sash units in the first and third openings; only the first opening's upper sash contains an air conditioner, the third opening's upper sash contains a single light.

North (side) elevation

Flights of metal stairs, with metal mesh and tubing rails, provide egress from doors centered on the north elevation at the first and second stories. A concrete stairwell, also protected by a mesh and tubing rail, leads to the centered basement door. Both the basement and first story retain their original wood, one-panel, four-light doors, while a flush wooden door occupies the second-story opening.

West (alley) elevation

The 1951 addition's long west expanse contains even fenestration, incorporating the same replacement styles present on the east elevation, with sets of widely spaced single windows in line across each story. At the first and second stories, the sets include, from north to south, three sets of two, a single window, and another set of two. Across the first story from north to south, paired casements occupy the first, third, fourth, fifth, seventh, and ninth openings. An air conditioner surrounded by plywood infills the second and eighth openings. The one casement and two-light style, with an air conditioner in the upper smaller sash, can be found in the sixth.

The second story boasts paired casements in the second, fourth, sixth, seventh, and ninth openings from the south, and the one casement, two-fixed-light style appears in the first, third, and eighth. Air conditioners protrude from the first's and eighth's upper sash. Horizontal siding infill surrounds an air conditioner set high in the fifth opening. Louvered metal grates cover wide rectangular vents beneath the eighth opening at each story: one between the first and second levels and two below the first story opening.

Filled with one-light awning replacements, the basement level displays, from north to south and in line with the openings above, three sets of two openings and a single window. A concrete curb, topped with metal mesh and tubing rails, protects a lightwell set several feet below grade that provides light to the basement level.

East elevation

The 1957 addition covers the 1951 education wing's south and east elevations, except at the second story, where the unfenestrated south end of the east wall rises above the roof of the 1957 addition's one-and-a-half-story administrative offices bay.

Interior

As its name suggests, the educational wing's interior provides classroom spaces for the church. Gypsum board walls and ceilings, together with linoleum tile and polished concrete floors and three-light wood doors, finish the central hallway and classrooms at each story. In the basement, first, and second stories, stairwells and lavatories fill the hyphen's spaces. In the basement and on the second floor, the hallways run north-south, leading to three classrooms to the west and two to the east side. On the first floor, one classroom and a large assembly room occupy the north side of the footprint, unlike the configuration on the other floors. Larger assembly rooms appear at the education wing's south end on the upper stories, and a laundry room and boiler room fill the same space in the basement.

1957 Addition

On May 25, 1955, the First Congregational Church Trustees accepted Orr Pickering and Associates' plans for a new church building to replace the 1883 and most of the 1928 portions of the property.[5] Over the next two years, the Modern sanctuary, narthex, and administrative offices rose on the south end of the church property. The steel-frame, limestone and brick-veneered building connects to the 1928 and 1951 constructions at its north side and consists of three bays: an L-shaped, two-story office suite and narthex to the north, bell tower at center, and two-and-a-half-story sanctuary to the south. Measuring approximately 10 feet wide by 20 feet long, the 71-foot bell tower rises at the northeast corner of the sanctuary junction.[6] Within the north bay's ell, a one-story extension with a corridor, lavatories, elevator, and storage areas fills the space between the narthex and the 1928 parlor and library. The 1957 addition has a full basement that includes a 400-person capacity fellowship hall with a performance stage, a commercial kitchen, an activity room, and choir robing rooms.

East elevation

The 1957 addition's east elevation faces North 27th Street and presents three Modern bays: the two-story north office and narthex bay, the 71-foot bell tower, and the tall two-and-a half story sanctuary to the south. Polychromatic dark red brick set in a common bond faces the exterior walls,

[5] "Congregational Church Members Discuss Plans for New Building," *The Billings Gazette*, May 26, 1955, p. 10. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411786905/

[6] "Congregational Church Sanctuary Planned" and "Congregational Annual Meet Set," *The Billings Gazette*, January 6, 1955, p. 11. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411551772/

and limestone panels highlight the pilasters, tower, and cornices. Extruded aluminum doors, window and door frames, and muntins provide additional interest to the elevation.

North bay: Set farther back than the other bays, a colonnade of eight, limestone-clad, full-height, deep pilasters fills the north bay between the bell tower and the parish house. Across the elevation, at the first story, aluminum-frame door and window assemblies fill the full width between each pilaster. Window assemblies do the same from the top of the second-story level, and brick panels fill the spaces between the first-story doors and windows and the second-story windows. A grand flight of granite steps to the south and a ramp to the north provide access. Stepped brick half-walls flank each of ramp's two north-south slopes, and a brick-walled concrete platform separates the steps from the ramp.

Each window assembly consists of three finely detailed casements divided horizontally into six sections: three one-light sections, each topped by a three-light section that contains one vertical light flanking two horizontal lights. The vertical light appears to the north side within the upper and lower sections and to the south at the middle section. Paired two-light aluminum-frame doors occupy the first story's three southernmost inter-pilaster spaces, and window sets occupy the north four spaces.

Bell tower: Standing atop a limestone plinth and measuring approximately ten feet wide by twenty feet deep and 71 feet high, the brick bell tower sits slightly forward of the sanctuary bays and dominates the 1957 addition's east elevation. It provides a stunning visual division between the north bay and the massive sanctuary bay to the south. Twenty-one courses of three limestone panels, canted inward at either side and flat in the center, attach to the full height of the tower's east side and hold a tall limestone cross at the top. The cross' horizontal bar aligns with the limestone-capped roofline, and its top vertical bar rises several feet above it. At the base, the center limestone panel in the first course reads FIRST / CONGREGATIONAL / CHURCH / 1957 in etched capital lettering. The tower houses a stairwell that leads to a room at the top where the church's original 1889 Meneely bell still functions. Four rows of three evenly spaced, rowlock-edged, square, louvered vents high on the tower's south and north elevations allow the bell's ringing to be heard across the city. Additional windows, within sets of eight squared openings appear on the tower's north elevation between the first and second-story levels and at the sanctuary's attic level. These sets each consist of a deeply set, single fixed window behind a brick screen divided horizontally by a single brick course and vertically with a single width of rowlock-set bricks. This arrangement gives the appearance of square windows stacked four high and two wide. A very shallow drip edge crosses the base of each set's lowest windows.

South (sanctuary) bay: Expanded Polystyrene (EPS) roofing covers the sanctuary bay's shallow-pitched front-gable roof, and metal wraps the roof's rake and eaves. The common-bond brick exterior wall features an 8-foot-wide recessed channel that runs from the foundation to the gable peak. Four single, long, evenly spaced, rowlock-set bricks protrude from the channel face every fifth course. Also, within the channel, full-width, steel-framed window assemblies appear at the first story and the gable end. Glazed with stained glass, each assembly contains a narrow one-light casement to either side of a large, fixed, one-light sash. Another full-height recessed channel appears at the east elevation's south side. There, a pair of flush wooden doors provide entry beneath a flat limestone awning. Limestone sheathes an 18-inch-high, two-foot-deep planter that runs north-south from the tower plinth to the south recessed panel.

South elevation:

Beneath deep metal-clad eaves, the sanctuary's south elevation presents three bays of common-bond brick and square, fixed, window openings. On the westernmost bay, set high and in line at the first story level, four windows screened like those on the bell tower to give the appearance of eight square windows, provide light to the interior. The easternmost bay displays four windows of the same style. These appear alternately at the west and east sides of the bay; those at the lower part of the first and second stories punctuate the bay's east side, and those at the upper part of each story to the west side. The east bay also provides signage at the first story's east side that reads: FIRST CONGREGATIONAL / UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST. A smaller sign below it reads: INTERTRIBAL / COMMUNITY PARK, in recognition of the park, with its mixed media sculpture installation, that occupies the church's south lawn.

The sanctuary's center bay contains five, evenly spaced, limestone panels that extend from ground level to the roofline. Wide brick panels, canted toward the limestone from an outwardly-pitched-vertical ridgeline, separate the limestone panels and give the bay an accordioned appearance. Along the limestone panels' full height, eighteen-inch square stained-glass windows alternate to either side of the centerline. Wide limestone trim highlights each window and provides additional depth to the panels' plane. Multi-light replacement windows, with vinyl cladding and false muntins, fill the full width the limestone shafts at ground level. Horizontally louvered vents top these windows at center and within the west- and east-most openings.

West elevation:

The 1957 addition's west elevation includes the narthex to the north and the sanctuary to the south. The narthex's flat roof provides no overhang, while wood and metal clad the sanctuary's eaves. The narthex fenestration pattern includes two large window openings with brick sills at both the first and second story: one at center and one centered in the north third. Battened plywood and an air conditioning unit fill the north first-story opening. The first story's center opening holds an original pair of wood-frame one-over-one double-hungs. Also at the first story, at the south third, a pair of flush metal doors provide access via a recessed entry. Above, at the second story, each opening contains an original steel window unit with nine fixed lights over a three-light hopper. Glass block fills the centered, basement-level window opening, and single, metal, louvered vents appear to either side.

The sanctuary's west elevation includes a center bump-out from ground level to the eaves. Unfenestrated across its west side except for two small, evenly spaced, five-light replacement awnings at ground level, the bump-out's north and south sides contain eight, full-width, ganged, steel-frame, fixed lights from high in the first story to the gable end. These windows illuminate the reredos within the chancel. The sanctuary's north bay contains a window opening centered low in the second-story level that houses a pair of eight-light, false-muntined, vinyl-clad replacements. In line below this opening at the basement/ground level, a fifteen-light replacement appears, and another small, five-light window punctuates the ground level near the bump-out. No windows appear across the upper stories east of the bump-out, but two small windows – a five-light and a fifteen-light – mirror those at the basement level west of the bump-out.

North elevations:

Rising above the narthex roof, the sanctuary's upper half story displays the same accordion arrangement present on the south elevation. The north elevation reveals three windows within each limestone paneled channel. The narthex bay's north elevation can be seen across the lightwell across the roof of the 1957 addition's one-and-a-half-story administrative offices bay. Consisting of a half-story, it contains four openings, each with a four-by-two light, steel-framed, fixed window.

Interior:

Administrative office interior: The 1957 addition's administrative area occupies its north quarter. Two offices look out over the access ramp at the east end, an extruded aluminum, quarry tile, and oak-trimmed staircase leads to the basement and upper story, and a long east-west corridor provides access to the 1928 construction to the north and the elevator, storage room, and lavatories to the south. The corridor turns south to access an office and interior stairwell at the west end behind the narthex. Finishes include vinyl and quarry tile floors, blonde cast brick walls, and acoustic tile ceilings.

Narthex interior: Visitors enter the church narthex at the 1957 addition's east elevation center bay via paired aluminum, one-light doors to a full-width vestibule. A second line of paired doorways provides access to the main narthex room. Above the interior entry doors, battened oak paneling covers the wall, and a centered, backlit, circular, stained glass window shines through. The architect provided that this "Pioneer Memorial Window," a stained glass version of J.K. Ralston's painting, titled "Sunrise Worship on the Trail" and originally dedicated May 15, 1942, be incorporated into the 1957 design.

Dark red rectangular quarry tiles, set in a basketweave pattern, cover the floor. Acoustic tiles cover the two-story high ceiling, punctuated by square louvered HVAC vents, and from which half-globe pendant lights hang. Blonde cast brick covers the lower half of the room's north and west walls, and driftwood gray oak-battened paneling clads the north and west's upper walls. The upper west wall contains paired inlaid-wood, open screens at its south and north sides. The screens display a single basketweave pattern. The narthex's south wall features sets of three one-light etched glass panels set in aluminum frames across its lower half. These tryptic sets depict the Garden of Gethsemane and consist of a fixed window to either side of a centered sliding door. Cast-brick-clad posts separate the glass sets. A band of limestone edges the base of the accordion-pattern's upper half, which offers canted blonde cast brick panels between flat oak paneled sections. At the south wall's east end, a trio of three-light, swinging doors lead to the sanctuary.

Sanctuary Interior: The church's southernmost bay interior opens to the rafters, two-and-one-half stories above the floor, except at the east end, where a balcony provides additional seating. Visually divided into three distinct spaces, the interior includes a smaller chapel beneath the balcony to the east, the long nave, and raised chancel to the west. Steel I-beam rafters support the sanctuary's pitched ceiling, and acoustic tiles line the chapel ceiling below the balcony. Tan and blue wall-to-wall carpeting covers the nave floors. In the nave, both the south and north walls display the accordion design, with limestone and stained glass between canted blonde cast brick panels. Metal heat registers appear beneath the south windows, and the etched glass window and sliding door assemblies appear across the north wall. The nave's nineteen rows of original dove gray oak pews line both sides of the center aisle.

The east chapel and balcony walls feature blonde cast brick, and vinyl tiles cover the floors. Stained glass windows – a large, fixed window flanked by narrower casements – appear centered on each level's east wall. The stepped balcony floor accommodates a centered stairway flanked by eight rows of pews. Battened oak paneling clads the balcony's half-wall.

The sanctuary's west end contains the chancel at center, work room and spiral staircase to the south, and sacristy to the north. Five quarry tile steps lead from the nave's center aisle to the chancel, which include a centered altar flanked to the south, southwest, northwest, and north sides by three stepped rows of pews for the choir. Lit by sidelights, the massive limestone reredos fills the center third of the chancel's west wall and features rows of smaller embossed crosses. A large, centered cross protrudes from the reredos face. Blonde cast brick walls flank the reredos. Dimensional oak boards set in tall, narrow vertical columns and divided by interspersed horizontal members create a screened effect on the chancel's east, south, and north interior walls that encircle the south and north interior rooms at the first story and the organ pipes at the second story. Tan gypsum board panels, set behind the screens, enclose the first story rooms, and flush oak doors provide entry. In front of the choir pews, the pulpit projects from the chancels south side, and the organ console stands on the north side.

Basement level: The 1957 addition's basement houses choir rooms, lavatories, an activity room, and a fellowship hall. Finishes include gypsum board walls, exposed concrete block, vinyl tile floors, and dropped ceilings. The large fellowship hall features a raised performance stage at the east end, and a commercial kitchen at the west end. In the activity room and in corridor spaces, exposed pipes and other utilities often run parallel to the ceiling.

1970 Shuart Memorial Park, dedicated 1971 (one contributing site)

Dedicated in 1971, the Shuart Memorial Park lies north of the church and memorializes the church's first minister, Rev. Benjamin F. Shuart, and the church's founding on May 24, 1882. It occupies the area where the former parsonage once sat (removed in 1967). The park features a graveled playground occupying its southern half with lawn to the north. The playground equipment was upgraded in 1999. In 2023, the playground equipment and gravel on the north side of the park were removed and sod installed to create the current lawn area. An iron fence with brick piers topped with concrete demarcates the park's boundary. The 1971 Shuart Park dedication plaque is mounted on one of the brick piers. Although the current appearance of the park differs from its original presentation, it retains its original footprint and function. Upgrading the play equipment related to safety issues and the addition of lawn reflects the evolution of the space for children. The area maintains its historic associations as noted by a 1970 newspaper article that mentioned children playing in a large fenced area north of the church.

2022 Intertribal Community Park (one noncontributing site)

The Intertribal Community Park is immediately south of the church and north of 3rd. Avenue North, which it parallels. It measures approximately 25 ft. by 140 ft. Dedicated in 2020, the small park consists of lawn and four mixed media sculptures by artist Sherri Cornett that honor the Indigenous peoples on whose traditional lands the church stands. A small rock-lined bed that hosts a few trees and vegetation occupies the west end of the park. Two fixed benches, one facing the street and one facing the church sit near the south-center area of the park. The park sports a sign that reads, INTERTRIBAL / COMMUNITY PARK.

Integrity

The First Congregational Church building retains a high degree of architectural integrity. While some modern infill and window assemblies appear across the exterior elevations, they occupy original openings and do not overwhelm the building's ability to convey its historic and architectural significance. The building stands in its original location at the northwest corner of North 27th Street and Third Avenue North. Dominated by historic civic and commercial buildings, the property's setting in downtown Billings remains intact. The building's period of significance, 1928-1970, includes various stages of construction in 1928, 1951, and 1957. These historic changes removed the oldest parts of the building but allowed much of architects McIver and Cohagen's (1928) and Cushing Terrell's (1951) designs to remain discernable and largely intact. Renovations during the 2000s introduced replacement windows in the 1928 and 1951 annexes and altered the northwest one-and-one-half story portion of the 1957 administrative bay to accommodate updated lavatories. Improvements in 2004 added an entrance ramp and a three-stop elevator, making all but the second floor accessible. The building's basement, first-story, and second-story floorplans also reflect their historic design and intent – meeting rooms, offices, classrooms, activity rooms, kitchens, and worship spaces continue to function as designed. The floors, ceilings, and exterior walls represent intact historic finishes. Similarly, the majority of materials, including the bricks, many windows, floors, and exposed structural elements, date to the historic period. The workmanship evident in the building's construction, materials, and craftsmanship testifies to the quality of the materials, as well as the craftsmanship and skill of the master masons and carpenters who built it and the architects who designed it.

The church's appearance, spaces, and retention of materials and setting all contribute to its high integrity of feeling and association. These qualities express both the aesthetic and historic sense of the historic period; they remain sufficient to convey the importance of the First Congregational Church's use as a center of community, social justice, and faith to the city of Billings. Further, the high integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association effectively reflect the property's historic and architectural significance.

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

[X] A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

[ ] B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

[X] C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

[ ] D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

[X] A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes

[ ] B. Removed from its original location

[ ] C. A birthplace or grave

[ ] D. A cemetery

[ ] E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure

[ ] F. A commemorative property

[ ] G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance

SOCIAL HISTORY
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1928-1971

Significant Dates

1928, 1951, 1957, 1970, 1971

Significant Person

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Midcentury Modern Church and Offices (1957)

Architect: Orr Pickering and Associates; Orval Graham, supervising architect
Builder: Cop Construction

Education Wing (1951)

Architect: Cushing and Terrell
Builder: R. I. Riedesel Construction

Parish House (1928)

Architect: McIver and Cohagen
Builder: Gagnon and Company

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

Billings First Congregational Church, also known as First Church, is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under criteria A and C. Billings First Congregational Church, founded in 1882 shortly after the establishment of the townsite of Billings, qualifies under Criterion A not only as Billings' first house of worship but also for the significant role the church played in transforming the frontier railroad town into a thriving city while cultivating a culture of community solidarity and inclusion through social action. The property also qualifies under Criterion C for its architectural significance. The Colonial Revival parish house and Midcentury Modern church and education wing additions reflect the distinct styles and eras of local church architecture and mirror the architectural development of Billings' civic core during the 20th Century.

Although the historical significance of the property dates to 1882, the property's period of significance is 1928-1971, spanning from the completion of the parish house in 1928, the earliest construction that remains on site, to the 1971 dedication of Shuart Memorial Park, created in honor of the church's first minister. Significant dates include 1928, reflecting the completion of the parish house; 1951, acknowledging the construction of the two-story Modern vernacular education wing; 1957, noting the Midcentury Modern addition, consisting of a sanctuary, narthex, and administrative offices; 1970, the year the congregation converted the north lawn into a park with a gravel playground occupying its southern half, and 1971, reflecting the year of the park's dedication.

As a religious building, Billings First Congregational Church must also meet the requirements of Criteria Consideration A: *Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes*. Both

remain true today. Despite its role associated with the spiritual aspects in the community, the Billings First Congregational Church is also significant as much for its association with cultivating a culture of community solidarity and inclusion through social action and its architecture.

Narrative Statement of Significance

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Church History

The significance of Billings First Congregational Church to local religious and social history is multifaceted. In the broader context, it represents an era of religious development in Montana when frontier churches served as houses of worship and played a vital role in community development. The church also represents one of the earliest and oldest remaining Congregational churches in the state and the first church established in Billings, its development mirroring the growth of the city. Finally, in addition to shepherding its own congregation, the church actively supported missionary ministers of other faith traditions as they cultivated their own congregations and founded local churches. Together, these contributions underscore the church's lasting impact on the development of Billings' religious life and institutions.

Missionaries and Early Churches

The early history of religion in Montana is rooted in European colonialism and the westward expansion of the United States under the Doctrine of Discovery, a 15th century papal decree that proclaimed Christian nations could claim lands inhabited by non-Christians. In essence, the doctrine provided religious legitimacy for the colonization of the Americas by framing it as a divine mandate to civilize and convert Indigenous populations to Christianity.[7]

Present-day Montana lies within the ancestral lands of several Native American tribes, each with its own history, culture, and spiritual traditions and, thereby, subject to the Doctrine of Discovery. These tribal lands were alternately claimed by France and Spain before the United States acquired them in 1803.[8] "The Louisiana Purchase doubled the landholdings of the American Union, an expansion that brought increasingly new opportunities to the young republic. Through the 1803 purchase, an impetus to connect the republic from sea to sea ensued."[9]

The Corps of Discovery, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, was pivotal in the westward expansion of the United States. In 1805, the expedition passed through what is now Montana on a mission to explore and map the territory west of the Mississippi and find a route to the Pacific Ocean. Lewis and Clark were also tasked with documenting the territory's vast resources and

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[7] "The Doctrine of Discovery, 1493," The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2012, p. 1. https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/04093_FPS.pdf.

[8] National Park Service, "Lewis and Clark Enter into Louisiana Purchase," 2025. https://www.nps.gov/places/lewis-and-clark-enter-into-louisiana-purchase.htm.

[9] Library of Congress, "Louisiana: European Explorations and the Louisiana Purchase," A Special Presentation from the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress, n.d., p. 114. https://www.loc.gov/static/collections/louisiana-european-explorations-and-the-louisiana-purchase/images/lapurchase.pdf.

establishing contact with the Native tribes.[10] The expedition opened the door for fur traders and trappers, such as those from the Hudson's Bay Company and the American Fur Company, who established trading posts in the region during the early 1800s. It also paved the way for Catholic and Protestant missionary activity that would play a foundational role in shaping the religious landscape of Montana.

The Northern Plains and Plateau tribes had already been exposed to western religion by European and American explorers and fur traders by the time Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, a Belgian Jesuit priest, arrived in the Bitterroot Valley in 1841 to minister to the Salish tribe. There he founded St. Mary's Mission, Montana's first permanent Catholic mission, near present-day Stevensville. The Jesuits, or "black robes," established another mission to serve the Salish Catholics at St. Ignatius in 1854, followed by St. Peter's Mission for the Métis and Piegan Blackfeet tribes near present-day Choteau in 1859.[11] Closer to Billings, the St. Xavier Mission opened on the Crow Reservation in 1887[12] and the St. Charles Mission in 1891. A few years prior, in 1884, Ursuline nuns, also known as "Lady Black Robes," founded the St. Labre Mission at Ashland on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation.[13]

Protestant Expansion into Montana Territory

During the latter half of the 19th century, the U.S. government moved to confine Native American tribes to reservations through treaties and military action and opened their lands to settlement and development. Gold and silver discoveries in the Northern Rockies brought waves of miners and settlers to Montana Territory in the 1860s and 1870s. Around the same time, ranching took hold in the region. Texas cattlemen in search of open range trailed large herds of livestock onto the Northern Plains. By the 1880s, large-scale sheep operations and homesteaders began edging out free-range cattle ranching in Montana's mountain valleys and prairie grasslands. The Homestead Act, Desert Land Act, and the completion of the Northern Pacific transcontinental railroad hastened the settlement and development of Montana Territory as it transitioned into statehood in 1889.

Protestant missionaries and circuit-riding ministers played a crucial role in meeting the spiritual needs of newcomers to the western frontier. These men of faith faced significant challenges in their ministry, including crude and lonely living conditions and the rough, sometimes lawless, characters that inhabited the early mining camps and frontier settlements. Episcopalian Bishop Daniel Sylvester Tuttle wrote of these challenges in 1866 while establishing a ministry in Virginia City:

> Alas! The longer I live here, the worse, the deeply bad, the more thoroughly soaked in irreligion, do I find the entire community to be. Looking earthwards, trusting in human agencies, the work of the Church here is the most discouraging that can be conceived.[14]

[10] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

[11] Lawrence F. Small, ed., *Religion in Montana: Pathways to the Present, Vol. 2,* Helena, MT: SkyHouse Publishers, 1995, p. 32-34.

[12] National Park Service, "Saint Xavier Mission and Pretty Eagle School," updated February 24, 2015. https://www.nps.gov/bica/learn/historyculture/saint-xavier-mission-and-pretty-eagle-school.htm.

[13] Marquette University, "St. Labre Church," Guide to Catholic Records About Native Americans in the U.S., Vol. 3: Western United States, Montana, MT-1, revised 2020. https://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/NativeGuide/mt-1.php.

[14] Small, *Religion in Montana*, p. 9.

As challenging as ministers found attempts to gain a foothold on the frontier, town developers considered churches the bedrock of stable, prosperous communities to attract settlers with families and foster a sense of society. While missionary ministers organized congregations and constructed simple churches in mining towns and emerging farm and ranch communities, circuit-riding preachers traveled great distances on horseback, facing harsh weather and rugged terrain, to conduct services in saloons, schoolhouses, and private homes or as guest ministers in the churches of established congregations. Among the most prominent circuit-riding preachers was Rev. William Wesley Van Orsdel, a Methodist minister better known as "Brother Van," who delivered revival services and seeded churches across a vast swath of Montana Territory.[15]

Congregationalism in Montana

Although Congregationalism was firmly established in the American West for decades, inroads into Montana Territory lagged until 1882 when the Congregationalists' American Home Missionary Society (AHMS) dispatched ministers to establish four churches in the Montana mission. In April 1882, Rev. James E. Smith founded Montana's first Congregational church in Butte, a notoriously unruly mountain mining town. The congregation, beleaguered by Butte's unsavory element and a rapid rotation of ministers, dissolved in 1895.[16]

Montana's second Congregational church was organized on May 24, 1882, by Rev. Benjamin F. Shuart in Billings, a nascent townsite along the transcontinental railway then under construction through the Yellowstone Valley.[17] The newly ordained minister was undeterred by the scene that greeted him when he rode into town with his horse and buggy:

> At this early stage in the growth of Billings the gambler, the dispenser of strong drink, and the women of the 'red light' were numerously represented and plied their several occupations brazenly and without. And at times they rendered the nights hideous, to unaccustomed ears, by the revelries and drunken brawls in progress in the tents. This state of things however did not last long, for when the railroad was completed to within twenty five or thirty miles of Billings, the greater number of these characters moved on to a new location, farther west. But a sufficient number of each sex remained behind safely to insure Billings against being cartooned as a 'Saints Rest.' … I was the first missionary to arrive in Billings. I met with a warm welcome, and everybody I met seemed to be pleased with the prospect of having a church in Billings.[18]

Rev. Shuart quickly set about building a congregation and the town's first church, the oldest Congregational church still operating in the state.[19]

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[15] Myron J. Fogde, "Brother Van's Call to Frontier Montana." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History, Vol.* 22, No. 4 (1972): p. 2–15. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4517715; "William Wesley Van Orsdel 'Brother Van' (1848-1919)," Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame, 2011. https://montanacowboyfame.org/inductees/2011/5/william-wesley-van-orsdel-brother-van.

[16] Lawrence F. Small, "*Trails Revisited: The Story of the Montana-Wyoming Conference, United Church of Christ*, Billings, MT: Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference, UCC, 1998, p. 17.

[17] "Billings lies within what was designated as Crow Territory in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851. Over time, the federal government ceded and purchased much of the treatied Crow tribal lands, reducing the tribe's territory to the current Crow Reservation southeast of Billings.

[18] Rev. Benjamin F. Shuart, "Reminiscences of a Home Missionary" in *First Congregational United Church of Christ: Our First One Hundred Years,* Billings, MT: Billings First Congregational Church, 1982, p. 27-30.

[19] Small, *Trails Revisited*, p. 18-19.

The AHMS established two more short-lived Congregational churches that year in Fort Benton, a bustling river trading post, and Glendive, another fledgling community along the Northern Pacific rail line. More encouraging to the AHMS, churches founded in 1883 in Livingston and Helena took root. Of the six churches established in Montana Territory during the early 1880s, only the churches in Billings, Livingston, and Helena survived into the next century.[20] In the 1890s, Rev. William S. Bell, the newly appointed Montana AHMS superintendent, renewed efforts to spread Congregationalism throughout Montana, successfully developing churches in larger cities that could support missionary activities in rural communities.[21]

Billings' First Church

Billings was little more than a tent town in a barren, windswept valley, flanked by rimrocks, when Rev. Shuart arrived in May 1882 on a mission to "plant" the town's first church. The Minnesota and Montana Land and Improvement Company established the townsite of Billings only two months earlier. The railroad hadn't yet reached Billings, and as lumber was in short supply until it could be shipped in from the East, the town consisted of a few unfinished, rough lumber buildings and tents that housed the townsfolk and their business enterprises. "At the time of my arrival at Billings," Rev. Shuart recalled, "the only completed wooden building in sight was the 'Headquarters' of the engineering force engaged in the construction of the road bed of the Northern Pacific railroad."[22]

For the first two months, Rev. Shuart held services in an unfinished saloon, a bakery, and, for a few weeks, in a bank — until he and church trustees raised enough money to build a makeshift church on land donated by the townsite company for the community's first church. Rev. Shuart recalled the "lumber of this building was hauled by wagons from the mountains forty miles distant, and by the combined efforts of the carpenters of the town, assisted by some of the citizens, was erected in a single day. This labor was all donated."[23] Rev. Shuart held his first service in the church on July 16, 1882.[24] This small church served the community for more than a year until a permanent brick structure was dedicated on November 18, 1883, under the pastorship of a new minister, Rev. Stryker A. Wallace.

In the early years of Billings' history, the congregation loaned the church to traveling preachers, including Brother Van Orsdel, as well as missionary ministers intent on establishing their own churches in the rapidly growing railroad town. The church also hosted the city's first Roman Catholic mass.[25] Although three churches — the Methodists, Episcopalians, and Catholics — had organized by early 1883,[26] only the Congregational Church boasted a dedicated house of worship until the Episcopalians built a small church on South 29th Street in 1886. The Methodist Episcopal

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 19-21.

[21] Small, *Trails Revisited*, p. 23-24; Lawrence F. Small and Frederick I. Kuhns, "The Congregationalists (United Church of Christ)" in *Religion in Montana: Pathways to the Present, Vol. 2*, Helena, MT: SkyHouse Publishers, 1995, p. 129-132.

[22] Shuart, "Reminiscences," p. 28.

[23] Shuart, "Reminiscences," p. 30; "Religious," *Billings Gazette*, June 22, 1882, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409422457/.

[24] "Religious," *Billings Gazette*, July 20, 1882, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409429232/

[25] Billings First Congregational Church, *First Congregational Church of Billings: Dedication of the New Sanctuary, 75th Anniversary of Its Founding,* November 3, 1957.

[26] Rev. J. Phillip Anshuts, "History of Religious Life of Billings," *Billings Gazette and Evening Journal, Anniversary Edition*, 1914, p. 3-5.; Rev. Preston B. Jackson, "Devoted to God," *Billings Gazette, Illustrated Edition*, July 1, 1894, p. 5-6. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85053069/1894-07-01/ed-1/seq-11/.

Church built their building in 1886, followed by St. Joachim's Catholic Church in 1887.[27] The Congregationalists also welcomed Baptist and Presbyterians into their fold until they became established sufficiently to organize their own congregations. Rev. J. Phillip Anshuts of St. Luke's Episcopal Church described the significance of Rev. Shuart and the Congregational church to the community in his essay, "History of Religious Life of Billings," for the *Billings Gazette's* 1914 anniversary edition:

> This building was a composite, intended to meet the needs of his family for a home, as well as furnish a meeting place for the Sunday school children, and a place for worship. This was also a place for the 'gathering of the nations,' for the itinerate missionary of other denominations found here a hospitable welcome and shelter, and two other organizations of later origin held their first services in this building. The name of S. B. Shuart is one of the lasting names of the community and aside from the historic associations that cluster about it, the man bearing the name has by genuine worth, enshrined himself in the hearts of all old-timers.[28]

The church remained at the heart of the community as merchants and tradesmen, home seekers and land speculators arrived in droves by rail. The Northern Pacific Railroad, which arrived in August 1882, and, soon after, the Great Northern Railroad, connected Billings to national markets and positioned the city to become the freighting and commercial hub of the lower Yellowstone Valley. Seemingly overnight, the tent town transformed into a bustling, prosperous city where wood-frame and brick buildings housed all varieties of enterprise and entertainment. The completion of the Big Ditch canal in 1883 brought much needed water to the parched landscape, making it ripe for irrigated farming. Billings continued to grow at a rapid pace through the turn of the century, curtailed only by a national economic depression in the mid-1890s. The city's population more than doubled from 3,221 in 1900 to nearly 7,000 in 1905, and the urban landscape underwent a second transformation as stately banks, churches, and commercial blocks, evoking permanence and staid tradition, replaced frontier-era structures. The expansion of the canal system and the construction of a sugar beet processing center in 1906 bolstered irrigated farming operations. Then came the homesteading boom, spurred by new legislation and aggressive railroad promotions, bringing roughly 20,000 homesteaders to the valley between 1909 and 1917. At the same time, the development of oil, natural gas, and coal industries in the region and the construction of an oil refinery established Billings as an industrial production and distribution center.[29]

As the city grew, so did the Congregational church's membership. By 1925, the church's capacity was strained to the point of needing to hold services at the Babcock Theatre.[30] This prompted the church, then under the ministry of Rev. Raymond Walker, to expand in 1928 with a two-story addition that increased the sanctuary and included a parish house and Sunday school rooms.[31] In the post-war years, membership in the church surged from 787 in 1944 to 2,235 in 1957. In 1951, a two-story education wing was added as the parish house could no longer accommodate the

[27] "Church Directory," *Billings Gazette*, April 30, 1886, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408898966/; "Corner Stone Laying," *Midland Empire News*, June 10, 1886, p. 5, https://www.newspapers.com/image/; "Dedication of the Catholic Church," *Billings Gazette*, August 22, 1887, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408898361/.

[28] Anshuts, "History of Religion," 1914, p. 2.

[29] Carroll Van West, *Images of Billings: A Photographic History*, Billings, MT: Western Heritage Press, 1990.

[30] Listed April 9, 2013, NR #13000153.

[31] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 57.

growing number of children attending Sunday school. Overcrowding required Rev. T. F. Rutledge Beale to hold two Sunday services and at times with some parishioners forced to listen to his sermons from the parish house parlor through loudspeakers. In 1956, the original brick church and part of the parish house addition were demolished for the construction of the 1957 addition, which included a sanctuary that seated 750; Rev. Beale held services in the Babcock Theatre during construction. The cornerstone of the new church addition was laid on May 26, 1957, and former pastor Rev. Raymond Walker delivered the sermon at the dedication ceremony on November 3, 1957.[32]

Since then, First Church grew the local Congregational mission by seeding the Mayflower Congregational Church on the West End of Billings, dedicated in 1963, not the first partnership for the church. First Church also served as a sister church to the Southside Community Church from 1915 to 1943, when the Southside congregation disbanded.[33] In 1959, First Church's congregation voted to join the United Church of Christ, which was formed in 1957 by a merger of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches with several other church bodies.[34]

Community Building

Since its founding in 1882, Billings First Congregational Church has played an integral role in shaping the social fabric and civic life of the city.

Social Life and Community Vitality

From its humble beginnings to the sprawling church of today, Billings First Congregational Church has been a dynamic presence in the Billings community. For nearly a century and a half, the church invited and welcomed members of the community through its doors, serving as an appreciated gathering place for social events and activities. This proved especially important during the early years of the town's history when wholesome entertainment opportunities were scarce and newcomers, living far from family and the comforts they once took for granted before coming west, craved social connection. The recitals, benefit dinners, ice cream socials, and other events organized by the church's Ladies' Aid Society not only treated attendees to an enjoyable outing but fostered a sense of community among townsfolk.

In October 1882, the church welcomed the public to a benefit concert that "was greeted with a good audience, which it proved to deserve." In addition to vocal performances, the evening program included six *tableaux vivants*, a Victorian-era entertainment in which actors silently pose to recreate historical, literary or biblical scenes as a living picture.[35]

A month later, the *Billings Gazette* regaled a church social and suggested such gatherings should become a regular community event:

> The sociable at the Congregational Church last Friday evening was a pronounced success. A goodly number of ladies and gentlemen were in attendance, and each one

[32] Billings First Congregational Church, *First Congregational Church of Billings: Dedication of the New Sanctuary, 75th Anniversary of Its Founding,* November 3, 1957.

[33] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 102-103.

[34] *Ibid*, p. 37.

[35] "Concert and Tableaux," *Billings Gazette*, October 12, 1882, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409431815/.

> seemed to join in a determined effort to make the occasion highly enjoyable. Refreshments were passed around during the evening and partaken of with loud expressions of approval. Music, both instrumental and vocal, delighted the audience, while the main feature of the occasion was pleasant social conversation. When the company separated, all felt that they would look anxiously forward to a repetition of the entertainment. A series of such social gatherings, extending through the coming winter season, would certainly go far toward promoting social enjoyment.[36]

The church also made the town's first Christmas a joyful and memorable event. An evening of Christmas festivities, replete with a decorated Christmas tree and gifts for the children, was a spirited encore to the Christmas Eve concert the night before. An article in the *Billings Gazette* hailed the "unalloyed pleasure" of the holiday celebrations:

> Restaurants and hotels vied with each other in presenting elegant bills of fare to their many patrons, and we presume that all enjoyed a good dinner and partook of their modicum of the traditional Christmas turkey. In the afternoon a gay turnout of sleighs, filled with light-hearted occupants, glided merrily through the icy streets to the music of their own ringing. The Christmas tree at the church in the evening was a brilliant success. After the hearts of the little folks had been gladdened by the distribution of presents, the interest of the large crowd assembled centered around the voting for the possession of the handsome doll described in last week's issue. … So passed in Billings the Merry Christmas of 1882, and we hope it may ever be our fortune to celebrate the day as joyously.[37]

In the years that followed, the church continued to offer the community and parishioners a welcoming place to gather, made even more so after the addition of the parish house in 1928 with its parlor room, library, and dining room, which doubled as a fellowship hall and gymnasium. The Ladies' Aid Society and Billings Women's Club met regularly in the parish house, as did the men of First Church who bonded over dinner meetings and a shared commitment to the development of the church.[38] The second-floor kitchen and dining room of the parish house accommodated banquets, fellowship suppers, and other large church gatherings. The dining room was also rented out to other community organizations, such as the Moose Lodge, the Methodist Women, and the Community Chest, to raise money for church expenses, charity drives, and civic-minded projects.[39] The church also allowed the Fox Theatre players to use the stage in the new church's fellowship hall to rehearse for plays and musicals.[40]

First Church has also invested in the well-being and enrichment of local youths by sponsoring a traveling youth choir and hosting recreational activities and social clubs for youths.[41] Foremost among these clubs is the Boy Scouts.[42] The church chartered Boy Scout Troop 2 in 1916 and

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[36] "Local News," *Billings Gazette*, November 30, 1882, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409432734/.

[37] "Christmas Around Town," *Billings Gazette*, December 28, 1882, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409433111/.

[38] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 44.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 106.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

[42] "Boy Scouts Will Mark Anniversary Week Here," *Billings Gazette*, February 08, 1930, p. 1-2. https://www.newspapers.com/image/410822790/.

continues to sponsor the troop today, marking it as the oldest active Scout troop in the State of Montana.[43] The church also sponsored Boy Scout Troop 1 from 1949 until the troop disbanded in 1968, and the Girl Scouts started meeting at the church as early as the 1930s.[44] In addition to the Scouts, First Church also hosted Boys' and Girls' Clubs, in coordination with the YMCA and YWCA, as well as the annual council meetings of the Yellowstone County 4-H Club.[45]

The church's commitment to the social vibrancy of Billings continues today by providing support and space to youth organizations, such as Forward Montana, a youth-led, civic engagement organization, and Billings Elite Amateur Boxing, a youth boxing club with a mission to positively impact youths by teaching the fundamentals of boxing. The church's education wing also houses offices for wellness services as well as Triia, a Native-led marketplace for indigenous artists, and Unspoken Words, a Native podcast group.[46]

Public Education

The Congregational Church played a foundational role in public education in Billings in the early 1880s. From providing leadership and organizing governance to offering space for instruction and professional development, the church's contributions helped lay the groundwork for the Billings' public school system.

As settlers flooded into Billings in the spring of 1882, community leaders recognized the urgent need for a public school. In June 1882, the Billings family made a sizeable donation for a non-sectarian school, providing the impetus to move forward with plans to build a brick schoolhouse.[47]

The Congregational Church, under the leadership of Rev. Shuart, spearheaded this endeavor. In September 1882, Rev. Shuart facilitated a meeting at the church to advocate for a new school district.[48] In June 1883, the Board of County Commissioners approved the new school district and appointed Rev. Shuart the Superintendent of Public Schools for Yellowstone County.[49] Bidding for construction of the schoolhouse was soon underway.[50] To finance it, the school board launched an $8,000 bond sale to augment the $4,000 from the Billings family.[51]

As summer drew to a close, school trustees rented a former restaurant on Minnesota Avenue to serve as a temporary school. The school term began on September 17, 1883, with 56 students. By

[43] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 97.

[44] *Ibid.*, First Congregational United Church of Christ, p. 99; "Girl Scout Activities," *Billings Gazette,* April 23, 1933, p. 10. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415172606/.

[45] "Give 4-H Club Council Program for Saturday Session Here," *Billings Gazette*, April 19, 1934, p. 12. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411185649/; "4-H Club Body to Meet Today," *Billings Gazette*, March 16, 1940, p. 5. https://www.newspapers.com/image/410146165/.

[46] "Billings First Congregational Church, *Campus Partners*, 2025. https://billingsfirstchurch.org/about-us/campus-partners.

[47] "Billings," *Billings Gazette*, June 1, 1882, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408881528/.

[48] "Local News," *Billings Gazette*," September 14, 1882, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409431074/.

[49] "Proceedings," *Daily Herald*, June 16, 1883, p. 2. https://www.newspapers.com/image/419557062/.

[50] "Proposals." *Daily Herald*, August 23, 1883, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409431074/.

[51] "Bonds." *Billings Gazette*, August 4, 1883, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409439455/: "Town Talk," *Billings Gazette*, April 12, 1884, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409444778/.

October, student enrollment rose to 75, and it became necessary to hire a second teacher and secure additional classroom space.[52]

To meet this need, the Congregational Church donated the use of its chapel for a primary school. An announcement in the *Daily Herald* reported on October 4, 1883, that "Miss Camp has been engaged as assistant teacher in the public school. She has forty-five pupils under her charge, and uses the Congregational church as a temporary school house, until the new school building is completed."[53]

The wood-frame church continued to house the temporary school until the end of the fall term in November 1883. Rev. Shuart had resigned his post with the wood-framed church planned for conversion into a parsonage for his replacement, Rev. Stryker Wallace, in time for the completion of the new Tudor Revival brick church.[54]

During this same period, Rev. Shuart, in his capacity as Yellowstone County Superintendent of Schools, hosted the first annual Yellowstone County Teachers' Institute at the church in October 1883. The institute provided three days of professional development, as required by state law, for teacher recertification.[55] The Teachers' Institute was held the following year at the newly completed brick schoolhouse, later known as the Old North School.[56] In 1885, Rev. Shuart's wife, Anna, was appointed Superintendent of Schools.[57]

The Congregational Church, under the leadership of Rev. Shuart, forged a legacy through its commitment to public education in the early 1880s. Years later, when Billings High School held its first annual commencement for the Class of 1898, this legacy came into focus when class president Maude Boyle delivered her graduation address. A *Billings Gazette* article reported "she characterized the event as the dawn of a new era in the educational affairs of Billings. The young lady traced the growth of educational advancement and declared that the free school system is one of national pride and national importance. She told in eloquent sentences about the progress of the schools of the land, referred to the fact that no other country has half as many teachers or pupils as the United States and truly asserted that illiteracy cannot compete with education. In closing, Miss Boyle said our public schools are our highest object and noblest aim."[58]

Prelude to a Library

In addition to supporting public education, the Congregational Church fostered community engagement and enrichment through a local literary society. Literary societies were popular in the West in the late 1800s as they provided townsfolk with a stimulating social outlet and a sense of cultural refinement amid the rigors and isolation of frontier life.

In November 1882, the *Billings Gazette* called for the formation of a literary society: "With winter near at hand our young folks—old ones, too—would do well to organize a literary society or

[52] Waldo O. Kliewer, "Foundations of Billings, Montana." Seattle, WA: University of Washington, 1938, p. 138.

[53] "Local News," *Daily Herald*, October 4, 1883, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/419557541/.

[54] "Town Talk," *Billings Gazette*, December 1, 1883, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409441887/.

[55] "Town Talk," *Daily Herald*, October 22, 1883, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/419557621/.

[56] "Notice," *Billings Gazette*, October 11, 1884, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409450631/.

[57] "Teachers' Examination," *Billings Gazette*, April 11, 1885, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408882137/.

[58] "An Important Event," *Billings Gazette*, May 27, 1898, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408829646/.

something of the kind, to while away the approaching long evenings and lend enchantment to time that would otherwise drag. Intellectually no little benefit is derived from such gatherings, to say nothing of the pleasant entertainment they furnish."[59]

By December, the call to action provided results and the Billings Literary Society began holding weekly meetings at the Congregational Church. These well-attended gatherings entertained guests with not only readings and discussions on literature, history, and science, but poetry recitations, musical performances, and speeches on politics and international events as well.[60]

As the months and years passed, community interest in a public reading room grew. These discussions ultimately culminated in an initiative to establish a public reading room in partnership with the Billings Library Association.[61] The church hosted a fundraising concert for the Billings Library Association in November 1885.[62] By June 1886, the people of Billings had their public reading room, the precursor to the city's first public library, housed in a room at the Stebbins, Post, & Mund Bank and stocked with 125 new books.[63]

Pandemic Emergency Hospital

The Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918 struck communities across the nation with devastating speed and severity, and Billings proved no exception. As the disease spread through the city in October 1918, the community mobilized to confront the public health emergency. The city board of health swiftly closed public spaces and enforced strict quarantine measures. By late October, health officials prohibited public gatherings, closed schools, and suspended church services in an effort to contain the virus.[64]

Despite these precautions, influenza cases surged, and St. Vincent Hospital quickly reached capacity. The Congregational Church stepped forward, offering the church as a temporary emergency hospital.[65] Trained and volunteer nurses and aides staffed the makeshift infirmary, which began receiving patients on October 23.[66] Nurses also provided home care, especially when whole families were stricken by the virus. In such cases, the Congregational Church cooked hot meals for delivery to the patients' homes daily, underscoring the collective effort required to confront the pandemic.[67]

The number of influenza patients at the Congregational Church reached 35 on October 28, prompting the Red Cross to open a second emergency hospital at the Methodist Church to

[59] "Local News," *Billings Gazette*, November 9, 1882, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409432254/.

[60] "Local News," *Billings Gazette*, December 21, 1882, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409433089/; "Local News," *Billings Gazette*, November 10, 1883, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409441364/.

[61] "A Good Start Toward a Reading Room," *Billings Gazette*, November 12, 1885, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408886808/.

[62] "Concert," *Billings Gazette*, November 19, 1885, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408887287/.

[63] "Billings Library," *Billings Gazette*, June 15, 1886, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408900861/.

[64] "Clamp Lid on City to Fight Flu," *Billings Gazette*, October 23. 1918, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415404330/.

[65] "Two Succumb to Influenza Here," *Billings Gazette*, October 26, 1918, p. 5. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415404976/.

[66] "Decrease Shown in Epidemic Locally," *Billings Gazette*, October 24, 1918, p. 6. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415404773/;

"Red Cross Elects Three New Executive Committee Members," *Billings Gazette*, December 3, 1918. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415165422/.

[67] "26 Flu Victims in Emergency Hospital," *Billings Gazette*, October 27, 1918, p. 5. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415163048/.

accommodate 30 more patients.[68] As they did for the Congregational Church hospital, parishioners and community members coordinated with the Red Cross to equip the space with beds, linens, and essential medical supplies.[69] The Red Cross also issued an urgent call for volunteer nurses and aides.[70]

The pandemic reached a critical point on November 2 when city and county health officials reported a combined 140 new cases in a single day.[71] To better accommodate the surge, the Red Cross converted the Billings high school into a centralized 115-bed emergency hospital with a consolidated nursing staff. On November 2, relief workers began transporting patients from the churches to the high school.[72] By the time the high school hospital closed on November 27, 220 patients had been treated at the three emergency hospitals, 54 of which had been cared for at the Congregational Church.[73] Those hospitalized represented a fraction of the estimated 12,000 cases reported by city and county health officials between October and December. This number included patients from throughout the region who traveled to Billings for medical care.[74]

In early December, the worst of the pandemic bega to subside in Billings. Schools and churches cautiously reopened, and health officials began lifting restrictions as case numbers declined.[75] With only 170 deaths from influenza and its complications, Billings and Yellowstone County fared better than other parts of the state.[76] According to an article published by the Montana Historical Society, Montana documented over 5,000 deaths statewide during the pandemic, nearly 1% of the state's population.[77]

The challenges Billings faced during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic reveals a community tested by adversity but strengthened by solidarity and cooperation. The Congregational Church's transformation into a temporary hospital underscores the significant role of faith communities in civic life during crises.

Social Welfare

The use as an emergency hospital during the pandemic serves as but one example of First Church's enduring commitment to the community's welfare. The women of the church, whether through the Ladies' Aid Society, the Dorcas Society, or the Billings Women's Club, dedicated countless hours to charitable relief work throughout the church's history. In May 1912, when the

[68] "Influenza Situation Fast Improving in This County," *Billings Gazette*, November 13, 1918, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415164124/.

[69] "Equipment for Hospitals Is Sorely Needed," *Billings Gazette*, October 28, 1918, p. 8. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415163160/.

[70] "Epidemic Is at Its Height Here," *Billings Gazette*, October 30, 1918, p. 7. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415163269/.

[71] "Five Deaths in City, County Saturday," *Billings Gazette*, November 3, 1918, p. 8. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415163407/.

[72] "Epidemic Takes Four Here Friday," *Billings Gazette*, November 2, 1918, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415163407/; "Red Cross Emergency Hospital Centralizes Effort in Great Drive Against Spread of Flu," Billings Gazette, November 3, 1918, p. 11. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415163538/.

[73] "Red Cross Elects Three New Executive Committee Members," *Billings Gazette*, December 3, 1918. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415165422/.

[74] "Little Disease Prevalent in City," *Billings Gazette*, December 14, 1918, p. 10. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415166200/.

[75] "Lifting of Ban Has No Ill Effect," *Billings Gazette*, December 4, 1918, p. 9. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415165501/.

[76] "Flu Epidemic Exacts Toll of 170," *Billings Gazette*, December 21, 1918, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415166617/.

[77] Montana Historical Society. "Reflecting on the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic in Montana," *Montana Press*, January 2, 2021; updated December 12, 2022. https://www.montanapress.net/post/reflecting-on-the-1918-spanish-flu-pandemic-in-montana.

county opened a home for the indigent, also known as a poor farm, on the Billings Bench, the Ladies' Aid Society sewed quilts and comforters to welcome with a touch of home the twelve new residents who were "in their age and thrown upon the mercies of the community."[78] The women of the church collected secondhand clothing and sewed layettes and bedding to stock the community's emergency closet.[79] They took meals to the sick and called on shut-ins, and they donated toys and dolls to "gladden the heart of a Billings youngster come Christmas."[80] They also raised money through church events to support youth scholarships.

Likewise, the men of the church, such as Rev. George S. Sloan, actively engaged in social action projects and charitable giving campaigns. Rev. Sloan, pastor of First Congregational Church, served as chairman of the Community Chest board from 1936 to 1942 at a time of economic distress for many in the community. During the Great Depression, the Community Chest played a crucial role in funding charitable "welfare" organizations that provided direct relief, in the form of food, clothing, and medical assistance, to those in need. Funds also supported character-building youth programs, a school milk fund, lodging for homeless men, women, and families, and the Billings municipal re-employment office.[81]

In a 1936 statement, Rev. Sloan praised the impact of these services:

> "It has been my privilege to see most of the reports made by the Salvation Army and the Associated Charities during the last four years … and I am firmly convinced that the work is well done and absolutely necessary and vital to the well-being of our city. This is especially true since the cases of need do not come under the ordinary relief and the people who have been ministered have been saved untold suffering. In most cases, this relief has been given at little expense and the people helped most deserving and grateful. I feel sure that the people of Billings will subscribe liberally to the Community Chest budget."[82]

The Community Chest sought to address situations not covered by government welfare agencies and filled the gaps whenever the county welfare fund had been exhausted. A 1939 *Billings Gazette* article, recounting the Community Chest's vital support for community services, reported:

> Previous to 1931, the relief problem in Billings and in the county was generally very small and the county agencies usually handled the cases." However, the story continued, "In 1931, one of the worst droughts ever known in this part of the northwest ruined the majority of crops, and the relief load proved too heavy for the

[78] "Members of Board Successful as Shoppers," *Billings Gazette*, March 26, 1912, p. 5. https://www.newspapers.com/image/953232367/; "Community Home for Indigent Well Kept," *Billings Gazette*, September 5, 1912, p. 2. https://www.newspapers.com/image/953183109/.

[79] "Philanthropic Board Report Shows Much Work Done in Year," *Billings Gazette*, May 8, 1924, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409500184/.

[80] "Church Women Donate Dolls," *Billings Gazette*, December 9, 1953, p. 13. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411789894/.

[81] "Women Will Seek Chest Drive Fund," *Billings Gazette*, September 19, 1939, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/410104108/; "Community Chest Group Organizes," *Billings Times*, September 3, 1936, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/954448783/; "Chest Keeps Vital Units Going in the City," *Billings Gazette*, September 3, 1939, p. 18. https://www.newspapers.com/image/410094040/.

[82] "Community Chest Backed," *Billings Gazette*, February 9, 1936, p. 7. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411296715/.

> city. The national Red Cross was petitioned and it assisted in providing the necessary relief. But Billings did not lessen its efforts to take care of their own people.[83]

Rev. Sloan's leadership boosted visibility and public support for the Community Chest, and charitable giving surpassed annual funding goals during his final two years as chairman. In 1942, he reported the funding campaign's returns exceeded expectations despite competition from other campaigns selling war stamps and bonds. He noted, "We believe the fact the drive reached and exceeded its quota this year, in face of numerous handicaps, speaks well of the fine sense of loyalty displayed by the people of Billings."[84]

By the late 1960s, poverty became a systemic issue in a city whose population more than doubled since the 1940s. The Billings Community Action Program conducted an in-depth study of poverty in 1969 as part of the broader War on Poverty, a central initiative of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. The study identified several pressing poverty-related issues in Billings: a lack of jobs and affordable housing, low wages, barriers to medical care, insufficient services for the elderly, limited childcare options for working mothers, and food insecurity.[85] The Community Action Program called for targeted, local responses to address these issues while educating the general population about the prevalence of poverty in the community to change misperceptions about the poor.[86] First Congregational Church took up the challenge, embarking on three key initiatives: affordable housing for the elderly, low-cost childcare for working mothers, and hunger among the elderly and disabled.

In 1969, Billings faced a growing crisis in affordable housing. The City-County Planning Board determined about 22% of all housing in the city was either deteriorated or dilapidated, and the city, to enforce housing and building codes, expected to force about 200 families from their homes within two years. Two-thirds of the displaced families were low-income and only half would be able to afford vacant rentals.[87]

The Helena Indian Alliance and the newly established Billings American Indian Center reinforced the urgency for low-income housing during meetings at First Congregational Church where they outlined the challenges faced by the city's urban Indian population. They estimated 800 Native Americans living in Billings, primarily from the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations, were in need of assistance. Few had adequate housing, and many encountered discrimination and barriers to employment.[88]

At the same time, members of First Congregational Church and Mayflower Congregational Church formed a joint committee to investigate the housing needs of seniors living in substandard conditions.[89] The committee organized a nonprofit organization called Concern, Inc., and secured

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[83] "Chest Supports Many Vital Activities in Billings," *Billings Gazette*, September 3, 1939, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/410094106/.

[84] "Chest Drive Exceeds Quota for This Year," *Billings Times*, October 15, 1942, p. 8. https://www.newspapers.com/image/954344622/.

[85] "Hunger Just '1 Problem,'" *Billings Gazette*, January 21, 1969, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415421531/.

[86] Dick Wheeler, "CAP Boss Lists Poverty Needs," *Billings Gazette*, January 23, 1969, p. 3-4. https://newspapers.com/image/409543908/.

[87] Roger Hawthorne, "200 Families Face Forced Move," *Billings Gazette*, September 2, 1969, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415019838/.

[88] "Billings Indians Face Three Big Problems," *Billings Gazette*, May 24, 1969, p 5. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409479597/.

[89] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 104.

an FHA-insured private loan to construct an 80-unit apartment complex across from North Park. Big Sky Apartments officially opened in 1970, offering 60 units to the elderly and the rest to low-to-moderate income families with children. FHA rent supplements were available to qualified renters, which enabled elderly residents on a fixed income and low-income families to live in modern, privately owned housing.[90]

In 1977, the same committee of Congregational Church members buoyed by the success of the Big Sky Apartments, pursued a second project to address the growing demand for affordable housing specifically designed for elderly and disabled individuals.[91] Prairie Tower, a seven-story high-rise apartment building with 109 rent-subsidized units was completed in 1979. The senior housing project included wheelchair-accessible apartments and a dining room.[92] A 1979 *Billings Gazette* article reported Prairie Tower and similar housing projects built at the time differed from publicly owned low-income housing in that they were "privately financed and owned, but are approved for federal rent subsidies" bridging the gap between fair-market value and the base rate of 25% of the renter's income.[93] Between the Big Sky Apartments and Prairie Tower housing projects, the collaborative partnership between First Congregational Church and Mayflower Congregational Church added 189 modern rental units to the market at a time when the city found itself challenged by an affordable housing shortage for elderly and low-income families.

Another major undertaking by First Church in the late 1960s was the Community Day Care and Enrichment Center, a community-funded facility for preschool children of working and student mothers and low-income families.[94] In 1968, the Junior League conducted a survey that documented limited childcare options in Billings for this population. Patti Selover, chair of the Junior League research committee, approached her First Church pastor, Dr. John McClelland, about collaborating on a community day care center. First Church committed to co-sponsoring the program for two years and donated space for the center on the second floor of the education wing, which held underused classroom spaces due to declining Sunday school attendance in the late 1960s.[95] The Junior League invested $12,000 into the center, and the Community Day Care and Enrichment Center opened in September 1969, staffed by two paid employees and a team of volunteers.[96] A year later, the center's enrollment increased from 12 to 30 preschoolers, many attending on scholarship, with additional funding from the United Way.[97] By 1981, the center employed a paid staff of 20 and expanded onto the first floor to accommodate 83 children.[98] The

[90] Mary Homer, "City Getting Low-Rent Unit," *Billings Gazette*, July 31, 1969, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409463267/; Roger Hawthorne, "Low-Income Housing 'Guarantee' Is Filed," *Billings Gazette*, September 11, 1969, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415023356/.

[91] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 104.

[92] Oscar Chaffee, "Seniors Face Wait for Housing Units," *Billings Gazette*, July 1, 1979, p. 41. https://www.newspapers.com/image/413204033/.

[93] Kathleen Merryman, "Public Housing," Billings Gazette, March 14, 1979, p. 14. https://www.newspapers.com/image/410035236/.

[94] "Day Care Center Has Director; Set to Open," *Billings Gazette*, August 24, 1969, p. 30. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409395969/; Memorandum of Agreement between the Junior Service League and First Congregational Church, dated June 23, 1969.

[95] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, pp. 43, 103.

[96] "Junior League Invests $12,000," *Billings Gazette*, June 12, 1969, p. 8. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415038087/.

[97] Carol Saboe, "Day Care Center Lets Moms Work," *Billings Gazette*, September 4, 1970, p. 22. https://newspapers.com/image/415998308/; Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 103.

[98] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 104.

Community Day Care and Enrichment Center operated at the church until 2018, after a 49-year tenure of providing affordable childcare to the community.

In the early 1970s, First Congregational Church also emerged as a key partner in establishing the Meals on Wheels program in Billings. The program took shape in 1970 when a coalition of concerned citizens started meeting monthly at the church to explore options to address the nutritional needs of elderly and disabled residents. Their work led to the launch of a pilot program in August 1971, several months ahead of the national White House Conference on Aging, an event that brought national attention to elder care issues.[99]

Initially, food preparation occurred five days a week at St. Vincent Hospital and later Deaconess Hospital before being taken to First Church.[100] Community volunteers served the hot meals to guests in the church dining room or delivered packaged meals to individual homes. The volunteers soon discovered the elderly participants, especially the homebound, looked forward to the friendly conversations as much as the hot, nutritious meals.[101] During its first year, the program provided nearly 4,696 meals to elderly and disabled residents of Billings.[102] The senior "dinner club" charged one dollar per meal with financial support from First Church and other local congregations.[103] On December 30, 1971, the pilot program transitioned into the federally and locally funded Meals on Wheels program.[104]

The church hosted the meal service for nearly two years before growing demand necessitated relocating the meal distribution operations in 1973 to the Senior Citizens' Center and other sites around the community.[105] Meal preparation expanded as well with Deaconess Hospital, Rocky Mountain College, and Eastern Montana College donating the use of their commercial kitchens.[106] By 1979, the Meals on Wheels program fully operated out of the Senior Citizens' Center.[107]

First Church remains deeply committed to supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable populations in the community today. The church provides a low-barrier winter shelter for the unhoused and serves hot meals at the church and in local parks on Fridays through the Food for the Soul program. First Church collaborates with local nonprofits through Family Promise of Yellowstone Valley to stabilize and empower families challenged by homelessness. The church also provides space for Sister Mary V's Pantry, in partnership with RiverStone Health, to support families and friends living with HIV/AIDS by providing home cooked meals, hygiene products, and access to emergency funds. The church also partners with 406 Pride to provide an LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit resource center and provides space for the White Eagle Talking Circle, a wellbriety fellowship; Warrior Women for Justice, advocates for missing and murdered Indigenous people; and the Native American

[99] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

[100] "MOW Notes First," *Billings* Gazette, August 18, 1972, p. 21. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415860297/.

[101] Carol Saboe, "For the Elderly: Food and Friends," *Billings Gazette*, March 26, 1972, p. 66. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411609691/.

[102] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 105.

[103] "Dinner Club Set for Older Persons," *Billings Gazette*, August 7, 1971, p. 16. https://www.newspapers.com/image/414491529/.

[104] "MOW Notes First," *Billings Gazette*, August 18, 1972, p. 21. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415860297/.

[105] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 105.

[106] Ronald J. Schleyer, "Elderly Meal Program Expanded," *Billings Gazette*, July 9, 1973, p. 13. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411609691/; Roger Clawson, "Mealtime Means More for Elderly," *Billings Gazette,* December 12, 1973, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/412460538/.

[107] Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ*, p. 105.

Development Corporation's housing navigation center. Collaborative community partnerships stand at the heart of First Church's ongoing efforts to safeguard the wellbeing of the community.[108]

Social Justice

Since its founding in 1882, Billings First Congregational Church served not only as a place of worship but as a stalwart advocate for civil rights, human dignity, and social justice in the community. Through every major chapter of progressive change in Billings—from the women's suffrage movement of the early 20th century to the refugee resettlement efforts of the Cold War and its ongoing grassroots advocacy against bigotry and discrimination—the church steadfastly uplifted the marginalized, protected the vulnerable, and called the broader community into collective action.

Suffrage Movement

The early 20th century witnessed a pivotal transformation in American democracy as the women's suffrage movement gained momentum nationwide. Montana was a pioneer in women's suffrage becoming in 1914, the tenth state to grant women the full right to vote. This victory resulted from a strong grassroots movement led by Jeannette Rankin that engaged hundreds of women and their allies across the state. Rankin, a former social worker and staunch women's rights advocate, had been involved in the national suffrage movement before returning to Montana where she became the leading voice for the enfranchisement of women in politics and the president of the Montana Women's Suffrage Association. Although Montana suffragists lobbied for the right to vote since 1895, their movement intensified in 1914 after rallying enough political support to place a referendum on the ballot. To encourage voters to embrace the cause, Montana suffragists launched an exhaustive publicity campaign with outreach to every county in the state.[109]

On June 30,1914, Jeannette Rankin announced the suffrage campaign would begin in Billings on July 6 with door-to-door canvasing, informational social events, and open-air rallies. She declared the campaign would continue until the November election and succeed in "converting the entire city by that time."[110] The Congregational Church was instrumental in this effort by issuing public endorsements and hosting lectures to inform the public of and encourage support for the suffrage referendum.

On September 11, 1914, the *Billings Evening Journal* reported on a public gathering where Congregational minister Rev. Walter Henry North, Montana State Senator W. B. George, and Dr. Anna Shaw, president of the National Women's Suffrage Association, spoke in support of equal suffrage for women. Following these addresses, the assembled women voted to organize the Women's Political Equality League of Billings to advocate for the adoption of the equal suffrage amendment to Montana's state constitution. "Plans were immediately made for a series of

[108] Billings First Congregational Church, *Campus Partners*, 2025. https://billingsfirstchurch.org/about-us/campus-partners.

[109] T. A. Larson, "Montana Women and the Battle for the Ballot," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol 23, No 1 (Winter, 1973), pp. 24-41. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4517748.

[110] "Campaign Will Start July 6," *Midland Empire News*, June 30, 1914, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408842785/.

addresses in Billings by some of the country's most noted women leaders in the suffrage movement."[111]

The following week, the newly chartered organization hosted public speaking engagements for Dr. Shaw at the Congregational Church and the YMCA after she first delivered a luncheon address to members of the Chamber of Commerce.[112] The *Billings Gazette* reported Dr. Shaw's address "was essentially a suffrage speech, but it was totally unlike any other suffrage speech the several hundred business men at the chamber of commerce had ever listened to before." Her thought-provoking message, which centered around "Women in City Building," was pointed yet sprinkled with anecdotes that entertained the audience:[113]

> Men, she said, are the first to declare that the home is the foundation of the state and the city, and invariably the home is the last place they legislate for. First, they make nations, then they make states and cities, providing them well with courthouses and jails, and finally, after all these are finished, they begin work on the foundation, the home.
>
> Men have done a wonderful work in building this great country of ours, but now they need the assistance of women. Our work is the mothering of the people, and we want to do it. The country is developed to such a stage that the hand of woman is necessary in its government. Among the great problems confronting the nation today are those of how to house the people, how to keep their cities healthful and how to educate the young. These problems fall just as much into the sphere of women as men. They are being discussed today in women's clubs, just as they are being discussed in city councils.

Dr. Shaw recognized the impact of recruiting businessmen and community leaders as allies in the suffrage movement as did Antoinette Funk, a noted criminal trial attorney and executive officer of the North American Women Suffrage Association, who stopped in Billings during a seven-state tour.[114] Notable Montana civic leaders who publicly endorsed the suffrage movement shortly before the 1914 election included prominent members of First Congregational Church, W. Lee Mains and state legislator Edgar B. Camp.[115]

> Since women have shown themselves so thoroughly capable of handling all rights that have been accorded them in the past, I feel sure that they could not fail to use to the best advantage any further powers that may be put into their hands through suffrage. I

[111] "Thirty Women Join Equal Suffrage Club," *Billings Evening Journal*, September 11, 1914, p. 2. https://www.newspapers.com/image/953180282/; "Women Form Organization," *Billings Gazette*, September 11, 1914, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411008765/.

[112] "Dr. Anna Shaw to Address Chamber," *Billings Daily Tribune*, September 19, 1914, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/954189594/; "Dr. Shaw Will Speak Today," *Billings Gazette*, September 22, 1914, p. 5. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411013799/.

[113] "Majority Vote for Suffrage," *Billings Gazette*, September 23, 1914, p. 5. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411014000/.

[114] "'Suffs' Storm Seven States," *Billings Daily Tribune*, October 6, 1914, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408878597/; "Woman Lawyer to Speak Here," *Midland Empire News*, September 29, 1914, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/408846134/.

[115] "Endorsements by Noted People," *Suffrage Daily News, Election Edition*, November 2, 1914, p. 3. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85053121/1914-11-02/ed-1/seq-3/.

> am, and always have been, in favor of woman suffrage and earnestly desire to see women granted the ballot at the coming election. — W. Lee Mains, Billings.
>
> I have always been a strong advocate of woman suffrage, as I believe it will have a tendency to purify the ballot. There is no question but that women have the intelligence to vote as their best judgment would indicate, and I believe that they would not be susceptible to wrong influences so quickly as the men. I voted at the last session of the legislature to submit the question to the voters of the state, and I am very anxious that it receive a large majority in its favor next month. — Edgar B. Camp, Billings.

The public endorsements by Mains and Camp mirrored those of other influential voices in the community, like attorney Louis W. Chapple, and served to amplify the suffragists' messaging and, thereby, persuade the men of Billings and surrounding communities to support their cause.[116]

> Women should be entitled to vote if they are allowed to own property, pay taxes or transact any business. Most women are capable of more sincere and conscientious thinking on public problems than the average man, and certainly better able to protect the home in such matters, and the home is the starting point of all good government." — Lou W. Chapple, Billings.

When the votes were tallied on election day, November 3, 1914, "the vote — 41,302 to 37,588 — was closer than most suffragists had expected," but the referendum passed with twenty-two of thirty-eight counties, including Yellowstone County (Billings), voting to grant voting rights to women.[117] Yellowstone County ranked seventh among the Montana counties that tipped the balance with 57%, or 1,712 of the 3,026 ballots cast by voting males in favor of women's suffrage.[118]

In 1916, Montana voters, including newly enfranchised women, elected Jeannette Rankin to the U.S. House of Representatives. As the first woman to serve in Congress, Rankin used her national platform to champion the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, an amendment that ensured the right to vote could not be denied based on sex. When Congress passed the 19th Amendment in July 1919, within days Montana ratified it.[119] Full ratification languished for another year until August 1920, when Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the constitutional amendment, thereby fulfilling the requisite threshold requiring ratification by three-fourths of the states before it became law.[120] Women exercised their unrestricted right to vote in the presidential general election for the first time in November 1920.

Earlier that year, the League of Women Voters established chapters across Montana to promote civic engagement and political action. In October 1920, the Billings League of Women Voters

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[116] "Endorsements by Noted People," *Suffrage Daily News, Election Edition*, November 2, 1914, p. 3. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85053121/1914-11-02/ed-1/seq-3/.

[117] T. A. Larson, p. 39.

[118] Montana Historical Society, "Suffrage: 1914 Suffrage Vote Map," *Montana Women's History*, June 27, 2018. https://montanawomenshistory.org/suffrage/.

[119] National Park Service, "Montana and the 19th Amendment," last updated August 9, 2019. https://www.nps.gov/articles/montana-and-the-19th-amendment.htm.

[120] National Archives, "19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Women's Right to Vote (1920)," *Milestone Documents*, last reviewed February 8, 2022. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/19th-amendment.

hosted the first of three meetings of a "school of citizenship" for "feminine voters" at the Billings Congregational Church.[121] These well-attended, nonpartisan meetings aimed to outline local, state, and national political issues and prepare women to vote on nearly a dozen state and federal education, health, and welfare measures on the November ballot.[122] Organizers and attendees also drafted a questionnaire asking candidates for office to clarify their stances on federal funding for the placement of doctors and nurses in rural communities, the establishment of a federal department of public education, expansion of the national child welfare bureau, regulation of consumer prices, and the elimination of discrimination. They also inquired about candidates' "disposition toward according married women independent rights of citizenship."[123] The women of Billings had fully embraced their new role as active and informed voters.

Refugee and Immigrant Resettlement

While American attitudes toward refugees and immigrants historically vacillated between humanitarian concern and nativist protectionism, First Congregational Church demonstrated a steadfast commitment to supporting refugee and immigrant populations in Billings through innovative initiatives, strategic partnerships, and public advocacy since World War II.

In the aftermath of World War II, public sentiment toward European refugees was sympathetic, given many were victims of Nazi persecution or uprooted by wartime devastation, but this sympathy was tempered by concerns about national security and economic dependency. As the Cold War intensified, American perceptions of refugees became increasingly shaped by anti-communist ideology, and support grew for the resettlement of refugees escaping Soviet-controlled countries and communist oppression. In response, the United States opened the door to European refugee resettlement under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. The Refugee Relief Act of 1953, the Fair Share Refugee Act of 1960, and the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962 further expanded admission, support, and naturalization of refugees escaping communist countries. Over the next four decades, federal legislation expanded the scope of resettlement efforts to include refugees and asylees from noncommunist countries who were fleeing political, religious, and racial persecution or who displaced by catastrophic natural disasters.[124]

At the local level, faith-based initiatives mirrored those across the country in welcoming and assisting refugees fleeing conflict and persecution to create a new life in Billings. In 1948, First Congregational Church initiated a program to aid in the resettlement of displaced Eastern Europeans and created a fund to finance resettlement efforts. In 1951 and 1952, the church's displaced persons program, under the direction of Rev. Stewart North and his wife Jackie, sponsored the resettlement of twenty-four refugees, many of them families, who fled the former Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc countries, including Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and

[121] "School for Feminine Voters Begins Today," *Billings Gazette*, October 17, 1920, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415391238/.

[122] "Women Attend First Citizenship School," *Billings Gazette*, October 18, 1920, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415392022/; "League of Women Voters Calls Another Meeting," *Billings Gazette*, October 28, 1920, p. 3. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415394373/.

[123] "Women to Quiz Candidates on Child Welfare Questions," *Billings Gazette*, October 19, 1920, p. 10. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415392295/.

[124] "Refugee Timeline," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, updated January 24, 2025. https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/stories-from-the-archives/refugee-timeline.

East Germany.[125] Sponsors were legally required to assist the new arrivals with transportation to Billings, housing, and employment, as long as they didn't displace American workers, while also assuring the government any displaced person they sponsored did not become a "public charge."[126]

A few years later, the failed 1956 Hungarian revolt against communist rule met with a brutal response from the Soviet Union and sparked "the greatest refugee crisis in Europe since the end of World War II."[127] President Dwight D. Eisenhower swiftly responded to the humanitarian crisis by instituting Operation Safe Haven to resettle over 30,000 Hungarian refugees across the country in the span of eight months.[128]

The faith community in Billings and the surrounding area rallied to the call. A *Billings Gazette* article from December 5, 1956, reported an interest meeting at the First Congregational Church where representatives from ten churches voiced enthusiastic support for resettling Hungarian refugees, "who have risked everything in their courageous fight against communism." The group established the Hungarian Refugee Council, a community-wide coalition chaired by Jackie North of First Congregational Church, to coordinate resettlement efforts:

> Since the refugees escaped with only the clothes they wore, they will be in need of clothing, furniture, bedding, cooking equipment, employment and housing. It was also brought out that they will need friends who will guide and help them during their orientation in the community. In some cases, there will be a need for financial assistance until they become self-supporting at which time this will be paid back and used to help other refugees.[129]

As the community prepared for the arrival of Hungarian refugees, members of First Congregational Church, Grace Methodist Church, and Peace Lutheran Church were already resettling over twenty Dutch-Indonesian refugees from the war-torn islands.[130] The Hungarian Refugee Council, that grew to include over twenty churches and community organizations in two counties, organized a benefit show, set up a donation collection center, and made plans to accept two families per week for eight weeks so as not to overwhelm community support systems.[131] The Council also engaged local interpreters, including former refugees, and English language instructors to facilitate the newcomers' integration into the local community.[132]

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[125] "Billings Becomes Haven and Hope for Many Displaced," *Billings Gazette*, November 25, 1951, p. 27. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411940240/; Memorial Committee, *First Congregational United Church of Christ,* p. 100-102.

[126] "Billings Becomes Haven and Hope for Many Displaced," *Billings Gazette*, November 25, 1951, p. 27. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411940240/.

[127] "Operation Safe Haven: The Hungarian Refugee Crisis of 1956," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, updated January 25, 2025.

[128] *Ibid.*

[129] "Hungarian Aid Launched Here," *Billings Gazette*, December 5, 1956, p. 18. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409624805/.

[130] "Hungarian Refugees Expected By Christmas; Indonesians Arrive," *Billings Gazette*, December 9, 1956, p. 21. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409628430/.

[131] "Refugee Groups to Come Here," *Billings Gazette*, January 8, 1957, p. 14. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409820838/.

[132] "Former Refugees Aid Newcomers to Start New Lives in Billings," *Billings Gazette*, February 3, 1957, p. 25. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409860070/; "Volunteer Teachers Give Seven Refugees Help in New Language," *Yellowstone News*, May 30, 1957, p. 6. https://www.newspapers.com/image/954537708/.

First Congregational Church's dedication to refugee resettlement persisted in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. After the fall of Saigon to communist forces in 1975, the church community sponsored two North Vietnamese families related to an exchange student already living with a local family.[133] The church's sponsorship of East Asian refugees continued into the 1980s.[134]

In recent years, First Congregational Church has continued to address contemporary refugee crises. Recognizing the absence of a local resettlement agency in Billings, former pastor Rev. Mike Mulberry and current pastor Rev. Lisa Harmon partnered with community leaders and concerned citizens to form Billings Sanctuary Rising in 2017, an alliance that advocates for the rights and basic needs of refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers while empowering them to thrive by providing compassionate guidance, a safety net, and a sense of community.[135]

In 2021, after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, Nancy Van Maren of Nations to Neighbors Montana recruited Rev. Harmon and three other faith-based leaders to seek federal approval as a sponsor circle, a collaborative support model, to sponsor Afghan evacuees. In 2022, the sponsor circle welcomed and successfully resettled four Afghani families.[136] Following the success of the Afghani resettlement sponsor circle and the ongoing advocacy and public engagement on refugee and immigration issues by groups, such as Billings Sanctuary Rising and Nations to Neighbors Montana, a federally-funded refugee and asylee resettlement office opened in Billings in 2024, the second in the state.[137]

Anti-Hate Movement

In the early 1990s, First Congregational Church found itself at the heart of a grassroots movement against hate crimes and bigotry. Billings, like many other rural communities in the American West, experienced a troubling resurgence of white supremacist activity and an alarming uptick in hate crimes against racial and religious minorities and the LGBTQ+ community. The community's collective resistance to this hate-fueled intimidation and violence catalyzed into one of the most unified and defiant anti-hate campaigns in America.

In January 1993, the Montana Association of Churches and several local churches held a candlelit procession through downtown and an interdenominational service at First United Methodist Church to launch a "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" and to commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life. Margaret MacDonald, a First Church member and executive director of the Montana Association of Churches, encouraged the community to attend, stating, "We are calling on the community to join

[133] "Viet Exchange Student's Family Will Join Her Here," *Billings Gazette*, July 21, 1975, p. 7. https://www.newspapers.com/image/412959961/; Christine C. Meyers, "Two Cultures Meet for a First Thanksgiving," *Billings Gazette*, November 21, 1975, p. 40-41. https://www.newspapers.com/image/413025246/.

[134] Memorial Committee. *First Congregational United Church of Christ,* p. 102.

[135] "Billings Community Forum Looks at Immigration, Refugees," *KTVQ News*, posted June 01, 2018. https://www.ktvq.com/news/2018/06/01/billings-community-forum-looks-at-immigration-refugees/.

[136] "Billings Community Forum Looks at Immigration, Refugees," *KTVQ News*, posted June 01, 2018. https://www.ktvq.com/news/2018/06/01/billings-community-forum-looks-at-immigration-refugees/.

Julie Koerber, "With Open Arms," *Yellowstone Valley Woman*, May/June 2022, p. 32-38. https://yellowstonevalleywoman.com/with-open-arms.

[137] Charlie Klepps, "Billings Prepping for More Than 100 Refugees, Including Some from Afghanistan," *KTVQ News*, posted Sep 13, 2024, and updated Sep 14, 2024. https://www.ktvq.com/news/local-news/billings-prepping-for-more-than-100-refugees-mostly-from-afghanistan.

in this important gathering as a strong public witness to our deep opposition to racism in Billings." She continued, "This is a chance to say we are brothers and sisters; we are a community that cares for one another. … With skinheads present in our community, we cannot afford to pretend this is someone else's problem."[138] Attendees left the service to find Ku Klux Klan leaflets, naming specific members of the community, under the windshield wipers of their cars. The leaflet's "central message was one of homophobia, but it also attacked Jews and blacks" as well as human rights organizations that advocated for these populations.[139]

In response, MacDonald and other faith leaders formed the Community Coalition to Oppose Hate Groups and spearheaded a campaign to garner community support for an anti-hate resolution, "asserting that they would not allow citizens of our community to be singled out for harassment and intimidation and specifically listing all of the groups who were being targeted, including gays and lesbians."[140] Nearly 3,500 individuals and dozens of local churches and organizations publicly endorsed the resolution.[141] Local law enforcement, elected officials, and school trustees bolstered the community coalition's efforts, and, in March 1993, Yellowstone County commissioners adopted the coalition's anti-hate resolution.[142] County commissioners further adopted a second resolution that encouraged "residents to unite, to report to law enforcement any violations of your fellow citizens' basic civil rights and to oppose the divisive tactics of hate groups."[143]

In the months that followed, the Northwest United Skinheads and the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan intensified their crusade to rob the community of its sense of security. They targeted Jewish families and people of color with hate mail and vandalized Jewish and Native American homes, leaving swastikas as their calling card.[144] They threatened and assaulted members of the gay community, toppled headstones in the Jewish cemetery, and intimidated churchgoers at Wayman Chapel, the African Methodist Episcopal Church.[145]

Throughout this time, the community did not fold to fear nor remain silent. Police Chief Wayne Inman encouraged local residents to stand their ground, saying, "What these hate groups would like to see is a community intimidated to the extent they will not speak out. We cannot allow that to happen."[146]

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[138] "Ecumenical King Service Set," *Billings Gazette*, January 9, 1993, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415667983/.

[139] Ed Kemmick, *Billings Pioneer Church: 1882-2007*, May 2007, p. 4-5.

[140] Greg McCracken, "Church Group Wants Others to Adopt Anti-Hate Document," *Billings Gazette*, February 26, 1993, p. 22. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415725456/.

[141] Kemmick, p. 4.

[142] Clair Johnson, "County Decries Hate Groups," *Billings Gazette*, March 10, 1993, p. 7.

[143] Johnson, p. 7.

[144] Dennis Gaub, "Hands of Hate Strike at School," *Billings Gazette*, December 11, 1993, p. 15. https://www.newspapers.com/image/412098834/; Roger Clawson, "Bigotry Shows Up in Subtle Varieties," *Billings Gazette*, October 24, 1993, p. 21. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411958855/.

[145] "Senate Panel Hears Bill to Ban Harassment of Gays," *Billings Gazette*, January 27, 1993, p.13. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415682241/; Lan Iwanski, "City Praised for Dealing with Hate Acts," *Billings Gazette*, September 19, 1993, p. 29. https://www.newspapers.com/image/412021424/; "8 Arrested in Plot to Start Race War," *Billings Gazette*, July 16, 1993, p.2. https://www.newspapers.com/image/412076769/.

[146] Gaub, p. 15.

Churches, including First Church, encouraged their members to demonstrate their solidarity with the black community by attending Sunday services at Wayman Chapel.[147] The community coalition organized a "Stand Together Billings" rally attended by a crowd of 450 and hosted other events, including a lecture series addressing "When Scriptures Lead to Hate."[148]

> We are responding, in part, to literature dropped in Billings' neighborhoods by the Ku Klux Klan which cloaks itself in high-sounding pseudo-Christian language, but which is exclusionary and punitive at its core," MacDonald said, " Hate groups like the KKK often misinterpret scripture to 'proof-test' their ideologies of separation and persecution of targeted groups.[149]

Tensions came to a head in early December 1993 when a piece of cinder block was thrown into a young Jewish boy's bedroom through a window the family decorated with the Stars of David and a menorah for Hanukkah.[150] The incident shocked the community and spurred MacDonald to suggest to her pastor at First Church, Rev. Keith Torney, they hand out menorahs during children's services to display at home, mirroring how the Danes worn yellow Stars of David to shield their Jewish countrymen against the Nazis.[151] The idea spread as Rev. Torney enlisted other pastors to encourage their parishioners to place paper menorahs, printed by the *Billings Gazette*, in their windows in support of not only the Jewish community but all victims of hate crimes.[152] Thousands of paper menorahs appeared in the windows of Billings' homes, businesses, and churches.

This symbolic act attracted worldwide attention, inspiring a PBS documentary, a children's book and play, and the national "Not in Our Town" movement. In 1995, the First Congregational Church and the Montana Association of Churches received the Roger E. Joseph Prize in recognition of their unwavering community leadership in standing against hate crimes.[153]

Across nearly a century and a half, Billings First Congregational Church has demonstrated a profound and enduring commitment to civil rights and social justice. From its early support for women's suffrage to its sustained efforts in refugee resettlement and its courageous leadership against bigotry, the church has consistently chosen advocacy over silence and inclusion over indifference. Guided by its Open and Affirming directive, the church continues to champion and safeguard the rights of marginalized communities by petitioning for a citywide non-discrimination ordinance, speaking out against policies that threaten immigrants and minorities, and advocating for LGBTQ+ inclusion and legal protections. In doing so, First Church serves as a safe haven and also fosters a culture of community solidarity and civic courage rooted in the conviction that justice, compassion, and human dignity are central to both faith and public life.

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[147] Kemmick, p. 4.

[148] Greg McCracken, "Anti-hate Group Rally Attracts 450," *Billings Gazette*, May 3, 1993, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/415664946/; Kemmick, p. 4.

[149] "Racism, Scripture Examined in Church Lecture Series," *Billings Gazette*, October 16, 1983, p. 4. https://www.newspapers.com/image/411951494/.

[150] Nick Ehli, "Mother Decries Hate Crime," *Billings Gazette*, December 4, 1993, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/412084780/.

[151] Kemmick, p. 6.

[152] Julie Forster, "Churchgoers Asked to Unite Against Hate Crimes," *Billings Gazette*, December 5, 1993, p. 20. https://www.newspapers.com/image/412088799/.

[153] Kemmick, p. 6.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

In addition to the historical significance of Billings First Congregational Church, the 1928 parish house and the 1957 church addition are also architecturally significant. The parish house, a well-preserved example of the Colonial Revival style, and the 1957 Midcentury Modern church addition represent two distinct ideological and aesthetic approaches to ecclesiastical architecture.

Colonial Revival

The parish house, designed by the architectural firm of McIver and Cohagen, expresses Colonial Revival characteristics that include symmetrical rectangular massing of red brick with contrasting lintels and keystones, multi-light double-hung windows, a circular gable window, and a pair of corbelled interior chimneys at each end of its gable peak.[154] The 1928 wings demolished during the construction of the 1957 church addition featured additional Colonial Revival design elements, such as a pedimented entrance and a cupola.

Colonial Revival architecture, popular from the late 19th to the early 20th century, drew inspiration from colonial American architecture. According to art historian William B. Rhoads, the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition spurred American nationalism and a desire for a uniquely American style of architecture. Rhoads, quoting a March 1912 edition of *Architecture*, noted proponents of the Colonial Revival style proposed the style "should be the accepted type of design for public or semi-public buildings in our small American towns" as it is "more nearly real and genuine architecture than any copying of English, French or Italian motives can ever be."[155] In the West, Colonial Revival architecture symbolized a collective American identity in regions settled by migrants from the industrialized cities of the East and by newly arrived immigrants seeking a new start in a new land.[156]

Midcentury Modern

While the Colonial Revival style was rooted in tradition and nostalgia for America's past, the Midcentury Modern style celebrated the future and in the case of post-war religious architecture, a spirit of optimism and hope.

> American Christianity has had few moments as opportune as the years following World War II. An overseas victory and a booming economy to match meant that the mood for many Americans was one of optimism, and that hope often translated into increased attendance and participation in churches nationwide.
>
> One of the mid-century modern design's key features was that it looked toward the future. It was an optimistic design movement that aimed to make built spaces reflect rapidly changing technology and a rapidly changing world. The accessibility and forward-thinking nature of mid-century design made it the natural choice for many

[154] Cyril M. Harris, *American Architecture: An Illustrated* Encyclopedia, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1998), p. 68.

[155] William B. Rhoads, "The Colonial Revival and American Nationalism," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, December 1, 1976, p. 239–254. https://doi.org/10.2307/989087.

[156] John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, "*The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History*," (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), p. 196-200.

churches striving to bring people in, especially denominations that already considered themselves more progressive.[157]

Architects designing churches from the 1950s to the 1970s broke with historic styles to embrace Modernist designs, characterized by clean lines, asymmetrical forms, natural materials, and a pronounced emphasis on light and openness. Midcentury Modern church architecture, favoring simplicity in form and function, incorporated new construction techniques and often replaced traditional ornamentation with the aesthetic use of materials, such as contrasting textures or patterns in glass and brick.[158] Architects from this era also conveyed religious symbolism — Noah's ark or Abraham's tent — through futuristic designs while unadorned simplicity represented unfettered access to the divine.[159]

Billings First Congregational Church was among several local congregations that adopted Modern architecture into midcentury church expansions or new construction, including First United Methodist Church, First Christian Church, and First Presbyterian Church Billings. Orr Pickering Associates' design of the church's 1957 addition incorporated varied geometric block masses, vertical window channels, geometric window designs, and prominent limestone and cast stone features punctuating simple brickwork on the exterior. The interior features a spacious narthex and a sanctuary adorned with a massive limestone reredos, undulating brick walls, and an abundance of natural light.

As with local churches embracing Modernism, the urban landscape surrounding First Church reflected a similar trend as a midcentury energy boom and rapid population growth fueled a flurry of construction projects in the city center. Modern multi-story banks and office buildings, such as Midland National Bank, Security Trust and Savings Bank, and the Socony Mobil Producing Company Building, transformed the downtown Billings skyline in 1955, followed by the Yellowstone County Courthouse in 1958, the Petroleum Building in 1960, and the former James F. Battin Federal Building, now the Stillwater Building, in 1965.[160] A 1960 *Billings Gazette* article declared these modern buildings were a "sign of the times" for a "progressive" business district, signaling a broader cultural shift toward innovation and modernity.[161]

[157] Rabekah Henderson, "The Theological Angle of the Mid-Century Modern Craze," *Common Good Magazine*, May 19, 2022, p. 2-3, https://commongoodmag.com/the-theological-angle-of-the-mid-century-modern-craze/.

[158] Henderson, "The Theological Angle," p. 2-3, https://commongoodmag.com/the-theological-angle-of-the-mid-century-modern-craze/; Diane J. Painter, "Montana Post-World War II Architectural Survey and Inventory: Historic Context and Survey Report," prepared for the Montana State Historic Preservation Board, December 2010. https://mhs.mt.gov/Shpo/docs/Montana-Mid-Century-Survey-Report.pdf.

[159] Jim Beckerman, "Space-Age Churches, from an Era of Hope," April 18, 2019, p. 1-3. https://www.northjersey.com/story/entertainment/2019/04/18/back-future-mid-century-modern-churches/3424938002/.

[160] "Oil Industry Plays Big Part in City's Life, Growth," *Yellowstone News*, April 5, 1956, p. 18. https://www.newspapers.com/image/954524453; "Open Houses Mark Completion of Major Buildings During Big Construction Year," *Billings Gazette*, January 1, 1956, p. 17. https://www.newspapers.com/image/409815092/; "Cornerstone of Yellowstone Courthouse Is Laid," *Billings Gazette*, May 2, 1959, p. 1. https://www.newspapers.com/image/410514422/; "All-New Newberry's Opening Thursday," *Billings Gazette*, November 3, 1960, p. 5. https://www.newspapers.com/image/ 410066629/; Liz Wilson, "Federal Building Not Ready: Delays Worth $48,000 in Rent," *Billings Gazette*, February 16, 1965, p. 2. https://www.newspapers.com/image/414464271/.

[161] "Downtown Billings Has New Look," *Billings Gazette*, November 3, 1960, p. 14. https://www.newspapers.com/image/ 410066729/

Architects

McIver and Cohagen

McIver and Cohagen, the architectural firm of Angus V. McIver and Chandler C. Cohagen, designed hospitals, civic buildings, churches, and schools as well as residential and commercial buildings throughout Montana and Wyoming. Most notable among these were Billings Deaconess Hospital, Rosebud Deaconess Hospital in Forsyth, Toole County Courthouse, First Baptist Church, University of Montana's Natural Science Building, and Montana State University's McMullen Hall. The firm's projects also included buildings at the Midland Empire Fairgrounds and the North Park tourist camp. Many of the architectural commissions in Billings are attributed to Cohagen.

Chandler C. Cohagen (1889-1985) studied architecture at the University of Michigan where he cofounded Alpha Rho Chi, a national architectural fraternity, in 1914. Cohagen successfully advocated for an Architects' Registration Law, which became law in 1917. After graduating from architectural school in 1915, Cohagen partnered with college classmate Angus V. McIver of Great Falls and for a short time, Walter V. Marshall, before moving to Billings in 1916 to manage the firm's second location. After the firm dissolved in 1936, Cohagen operated as an independent architect and is credited with designing 200 buildings throughout his career, including the Yellowstone County Courthouse in Billings in 1958, the Montana Governor's Mansion in Helena in 1959, and numerous schools and Masonic lodges. He also co-designed the former Billings City Hall in 1940.[162] His designs exhibit a broad range of Revival and Modern styles.

Orr Pickering and Associates

Orr Pickering (1904-1964), a graduate of the University of Washington's Department of Architecture, started his career in Seattle before moving to Billings where he founded Orr Pickering and Associates. In addition to Billings First Congregational Church Midcentury Modern addition, the firm's commissions included Midland National Bank, Eddy's Bakery, and the Socony Mobil (ExxonMobil) and Petroleum buildings in Billings, the First National Bank of Miles City, and Montana State University's Gaines Hall in Bozeman. Orr Pickering and Associates also designed the residence halls at Montana State University Billings and several city public works projects including a city parking garage, an animal shelter, and a shop and warehouse for the water department. Orval Graham, the supervising architect on the church project, went on to found JGA Architects with Willard Johnson in 1967.

[162] Cohagen biography by CTA Architects and Engineers, Billings. MT SHPO architect files, Helena, MT; "Architect Cohagen Dead at Age 96," *Billings Gazette*, Dec 12, 1985, p 23. https://www.newspapers.com/image/413366766/.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

____ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
____ previously listed in the National Register
____ previously determined eligible by the National Register
____ designated a National Historic Landmark
____ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #_____
____ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
____ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

__X_ State Historic Preservation Office
____ Other State agency
____ Federal agency
____ Local government
____ University
____ Other
____ Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): N/A

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: 0.706 acres (30,738 sq ft)

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum WGS 84

A.	Latitude	45.784740	Longitude	-108.507417
B.	Latitude	45.784947	Longitude	-108.506972
C.	Latitude	45.784435	Longitude	-108.506466
D.	Latitude	45.784150	Longitude	-108.506770

Verbal Boundary Description

Billings First Congregational Church sits on the southeastern corner of North 27th Street and Third Avenue North in Billings, Montana. According to the Montana Cadastral, the property's legal description is "BILLINGS ORIGINAL TOWNSITE, S32, T01 N, R26 E, BLOCK 44, Lot 1 - 9, & LTS 5-9 BLK 56 FOSTERS ADDITION (LESS 762 SQ FT ST TO CITY)." Attached maps in Section 9, pages 53 and 54, confirm this boundary.

Boundary Justification

The boundary encompasses Billings First Congregational Church and the church grounds, including Shuart's Memorial Park with a playground and shed, the Intertribal Community Park, and staff parking. The church and grounds are within the historic legal boundaries of the property.

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11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Ann Kooistra-Manning, Consultant
Organization: N/A
Street & number: 2517 Virginia Lane
City or town: Billings State: Montana Zip code: 59102
E-mail: a.kooistramanning@gmail.com
Telephone: (406) 256-7315
Date: August 4, 2025

Architectural description by:

Name/title: Kate Hampton, Community Preservation Coordinator
Organization: Montana State Historic Preservation Office
Street & number: 225 North Roberts / PO Box 201201
City or town: Helena State: Montana Zip code: 59620
E-mail: khampton@mt.gov
Telephone: (406) 444-7742

Archival research and editing assistance by:

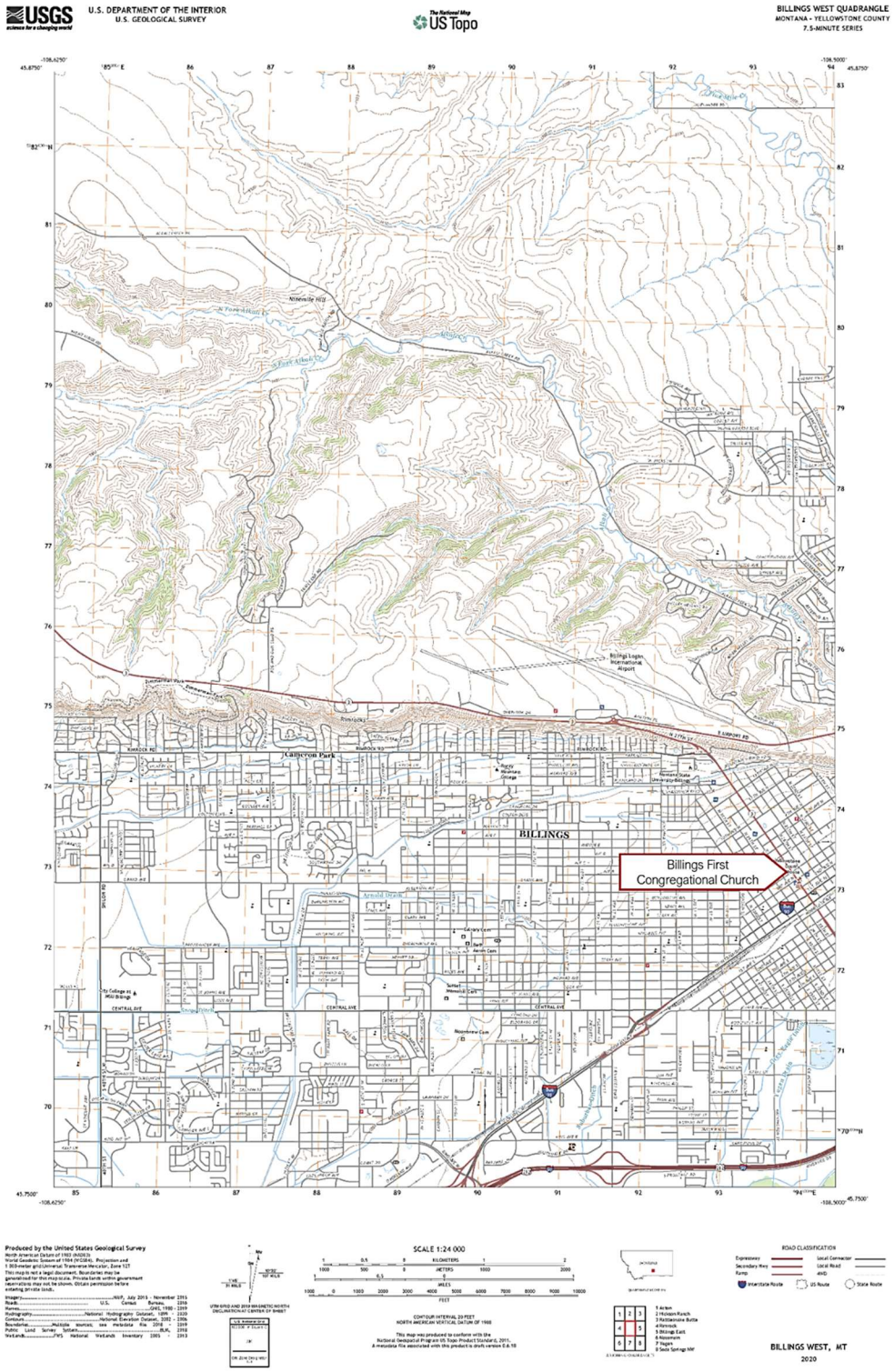
Name/title: Nathan Sonnenschein, Church Historian
Organization: Billings First Congregational Church
Street & number: 310 North 27th Street
City or town: Billings State: Montana Zip code: 59101
E-mail: info@billingsfirstchurch.com
Telephone: (406) 245-6477

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

USGS Topographical Map: Billings West, MT (7.5 minutes)



Source: United States Geological Survey

Yellowstone County GIS Map

This document is intended for informational purposes only and is not guaranteed to be accurate nor current.
Billings First Congregational Church
YELLOWSTONE COUNTY GIS
BILLINGS, MONTANA
1 inch = 656 feet
1 inch = 200 meters
SEC 32, T1NR26E
Date: 8/12/2022

Source: Yellowstone County GIS

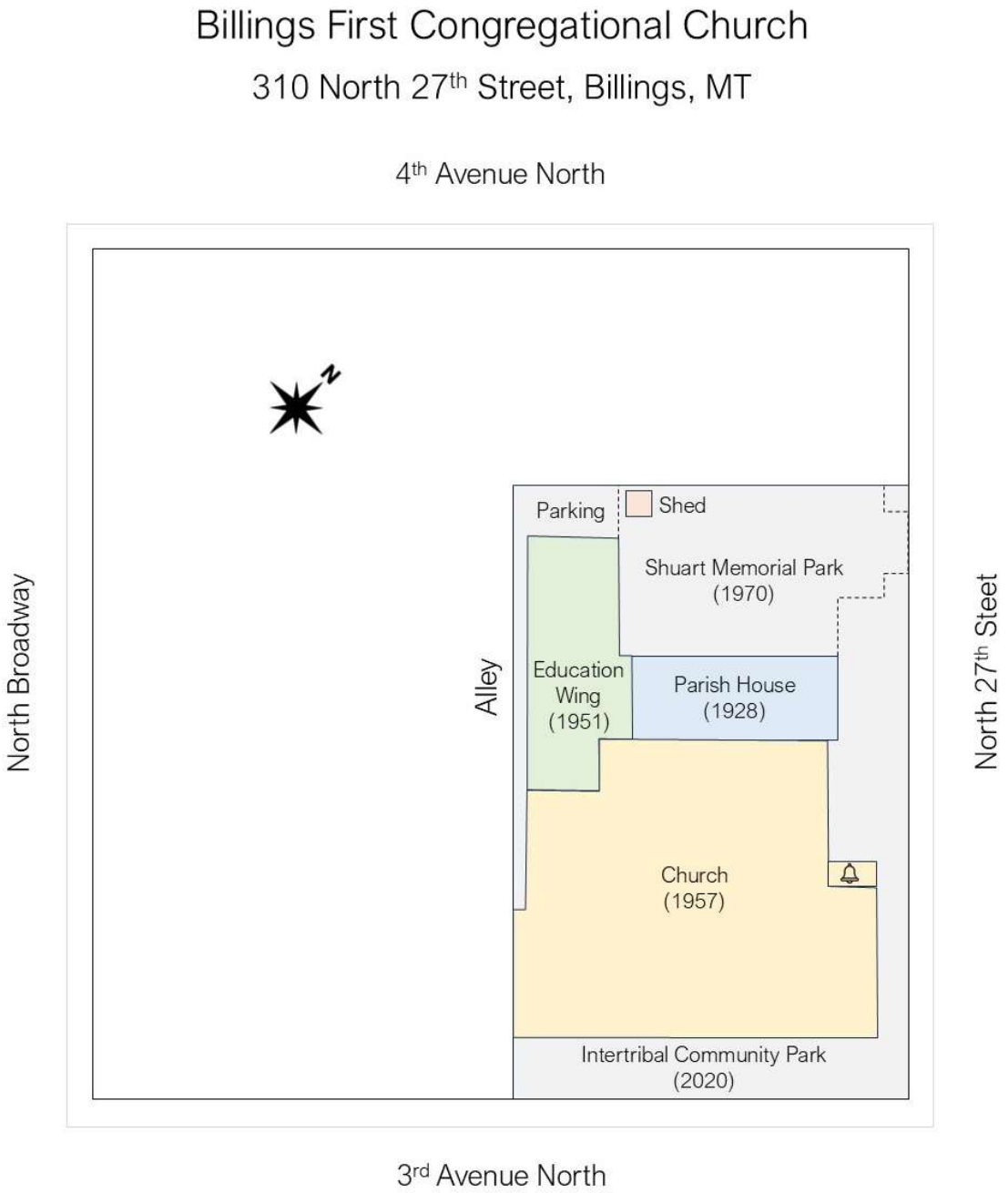
Aerial View of Property

Billings First Congregational Church

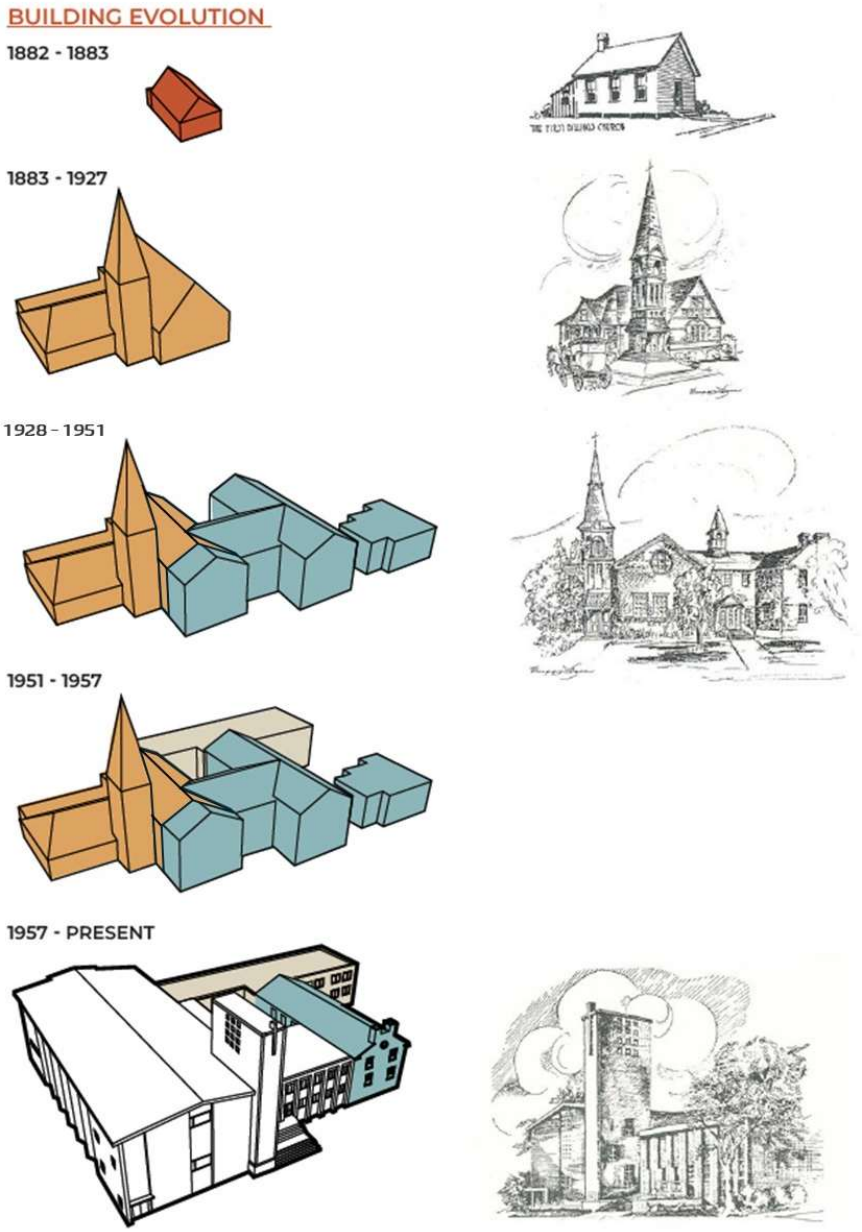
310 North 27th Street, Billings, MT

Source: Yellowstone County Parcel Viewer

Sketch Map

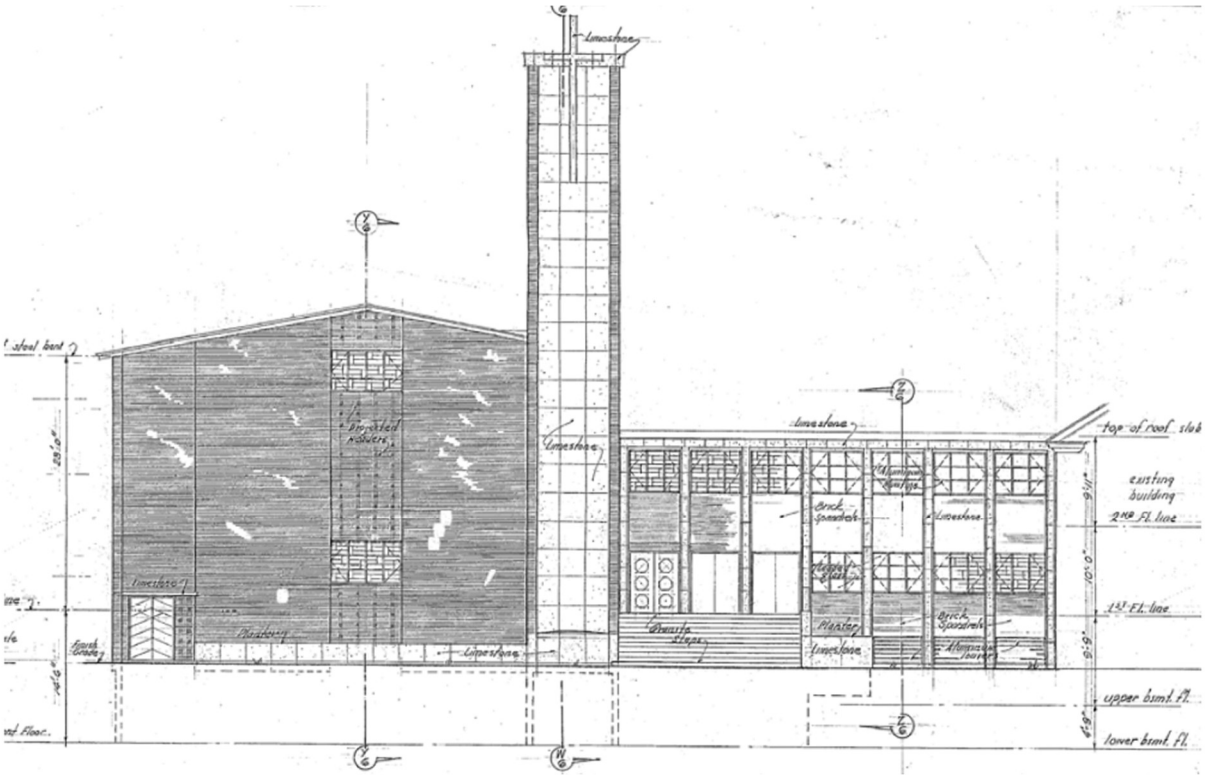

Billings First Congregational Church
310 North 27th Street, Billings, MT
4th Avenue North
North Broadway
Alley
North 27th Steet
Parking
Shed
Shuart Memorial Park
(1970)
Education
Wing
(1951)
Parish House
(1928)
Church
(1957)
Intertribal Community Park
(2020)
3rd Avenue North

Building Progression Illustration

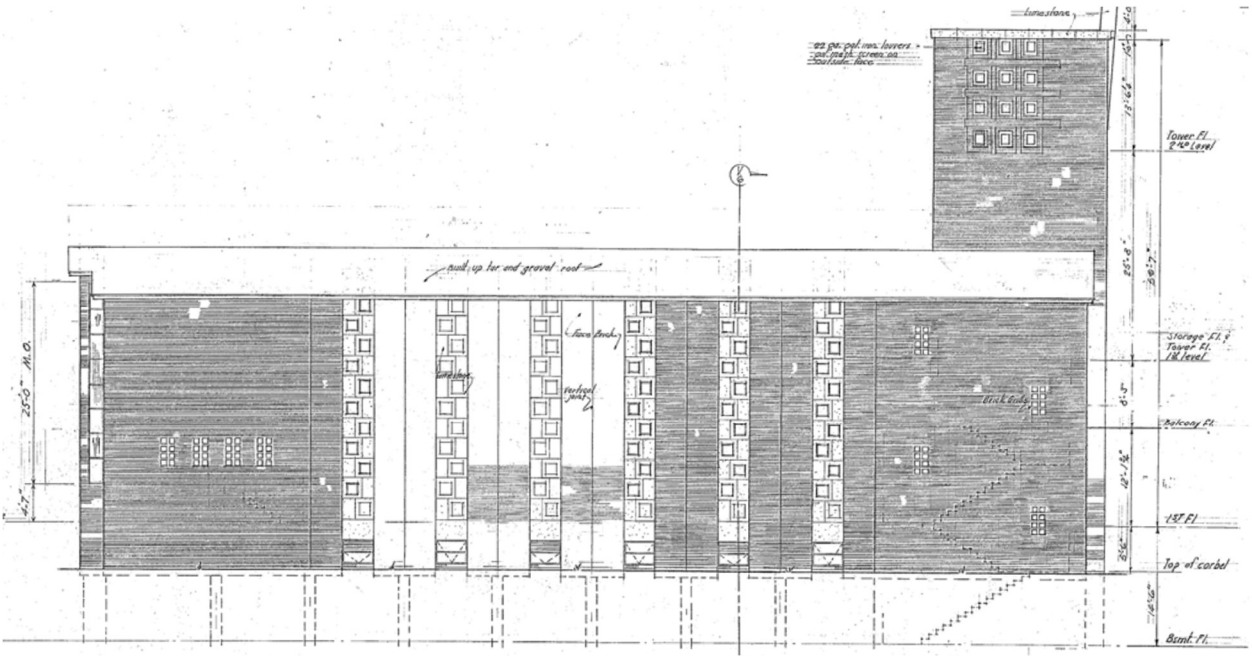


Source: Adapted from a figure depicting the church's evolution on page 7 of the February 2024 *Billings First Congregational Church Needs Assessment* prepared by High Plains Architects of Billings, Montana.

Architectural Drawings

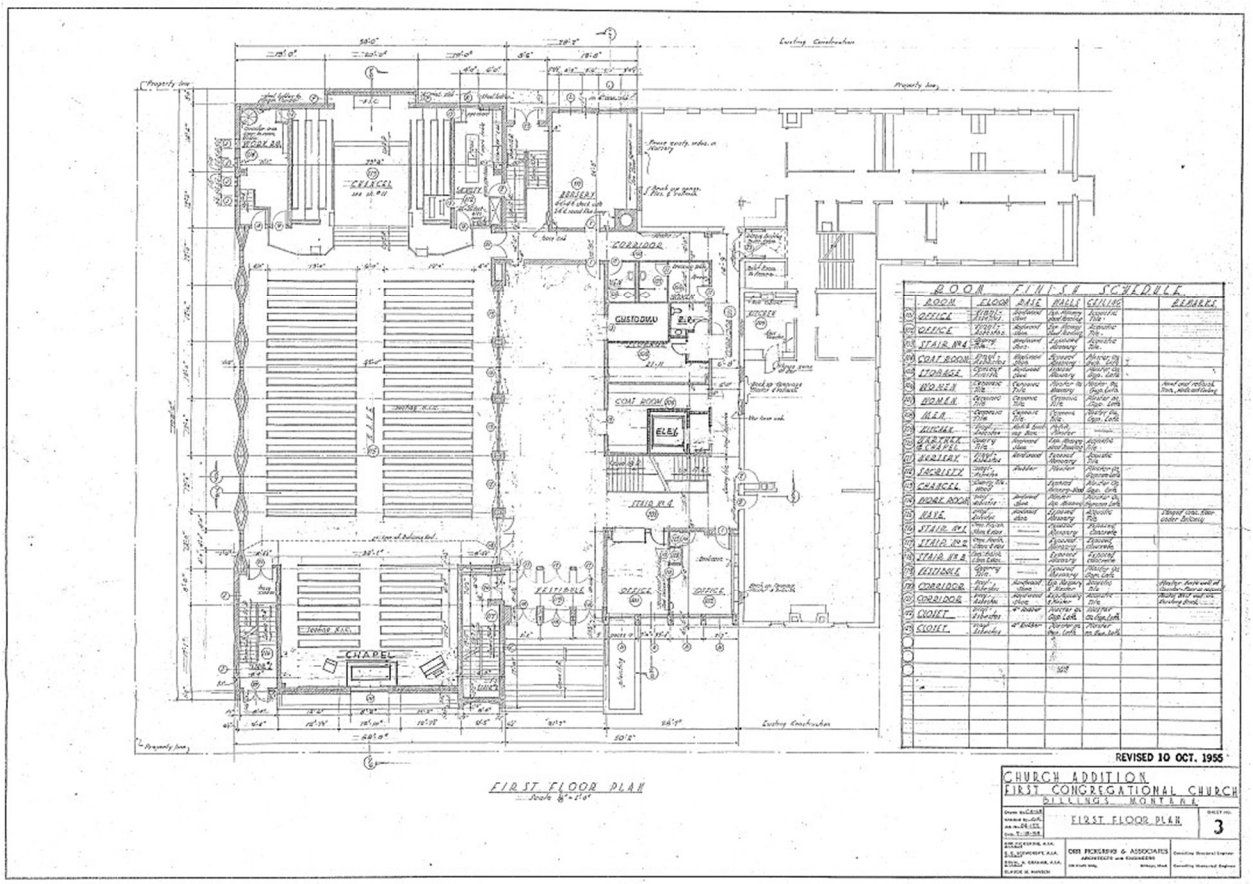


East Elevation



South Elevation

Architectural Drawings



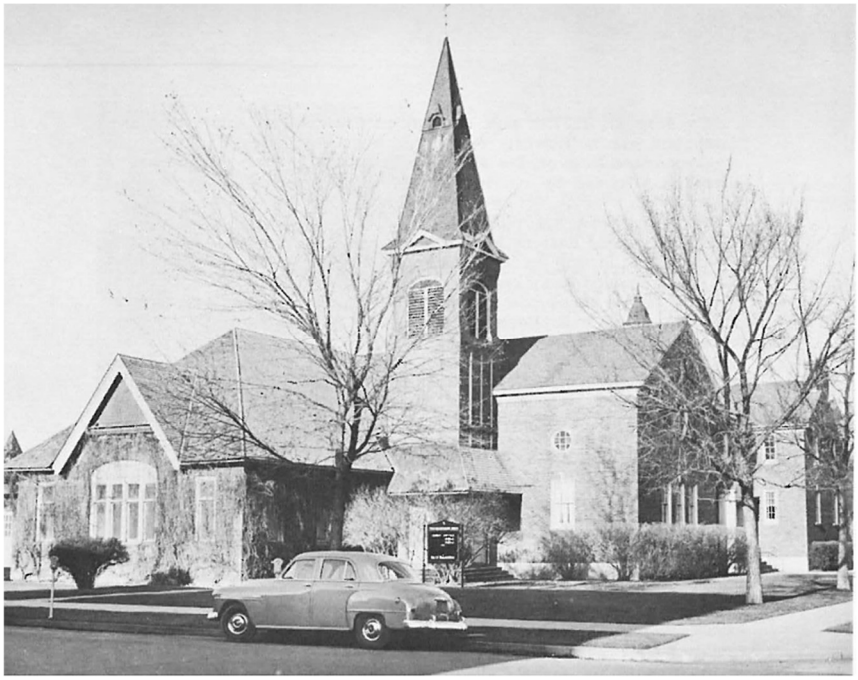
First Floor Plan

Source: 1955 Architectural Plans drafted by Orr Pickering & Associates

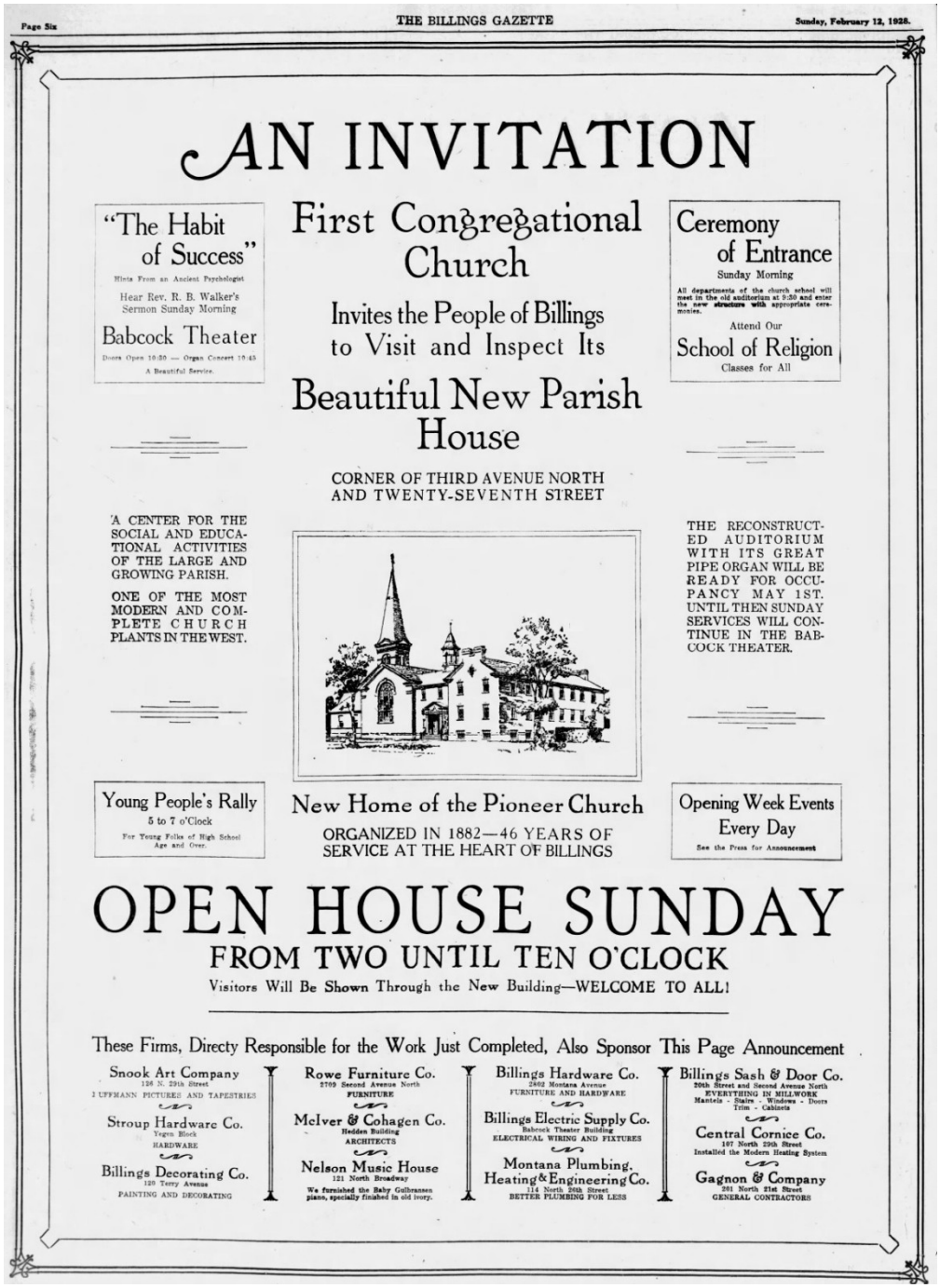
Historic Images

Detail of "Panoramic View of Billings, Montana, c. 1915," by Haines Photo Co, that shows the 1883 church facing onto Third Avenue North and the Chamber of Commerce Building and the Yellowstone County Courthouse along North 27th Street to the northeast. This image is available from the United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs Division at https://loc.gov/pictures/resource/pan.6a13798/.

1914 Parsonage. No longer extant. Dates unknown.



Photos of Billings First Congregational Church before and after the construction of the 1957 Midcentury Modern church; view to the west from the intersection of North 27th Street and Third Avenue North. Photos courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.



Page Six THE BILLINGS GAZETTE Sunday, February 12, 1928.

AN INVITATION

"The Habit of Success"
Hints From an Ancient Psychologist
Hear Rev. R. B. Walker's Sermon Sunday Morning
Babcock Theater
Doors Open 10:30 — Organ Concert 10:45
A Beautiful Service.

First Congregational Church

Invites the People of Billings to Visit and Inspect Its

Beautiful New Parish House

CORNER OF THIRD AVENUE NORTH AND TWENTY-SEVENTH STREET

Ceremony of Entrance
Sunday Morning
All departments of the church school will meet in the old auditorium at 9:30 and enter the new structure with appropriate ceremonies.
Attend Our
School of Religion
Classes for All

'A CENTER FOR THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE LARGE AND GROWING PARISH.

ONE OF THE MOST MODERN AND COMPLETE CHURCH PLANTS IN THE WEST.

THE RECONSTRUCTED AUDITORIUM WITH ITS GREAT PIPE ORGAN WILL BE READY FOR OCCUPANCY MAY 1ST. UNTIL THEN SUNDAY SERVICES WILL CONTINUE IN THE BABCOCK THEATER.

Young People's Rally
5 to 7 o'Clock
For Young Folks of High School Age and Over.

New Home of the Pioneer Church
ORGANIZED IN 1882—46 YEARS OF SERVICE AT THE HEART OF BILLINGS

Opening Week Events Every Day
See the Press for Announcement

OPEN HOUSE SUNDAY

FROM TWO UNTIL TEN O'CLOCK

Visitors Will Be Shown Through the New Building—WELCOME TO ALL!

These Firms, Directy Responsible for the Work Just Completed, Also Sponsor This Page Announcement

Snook Art Company
126 N. 29th Street
TAPESTRIES AND TAPESTRIES

Stroup Hardware Co.
Yegen Block
HARDWARE

Billings Decorating Co.
126 Terry Avenue
PAINTING AND DECORATING

Rowe Furniture Co.
2709 Second Avenue North
FURNITURE

McIver & Cohagen Co.
Hedden Building
ARCHITECTS

Nelson Music House
121 North Broadway
We furnished the Baby Gulbransen piano, specially finished in old ivory.

Billings Hardware Co.
2402 Montana Avenue
FURNITURE AND HARDWARE

Billings Electric Supply Co.
Babcock Theater Building
ELECTRICAL WIRING AND FIXTURES

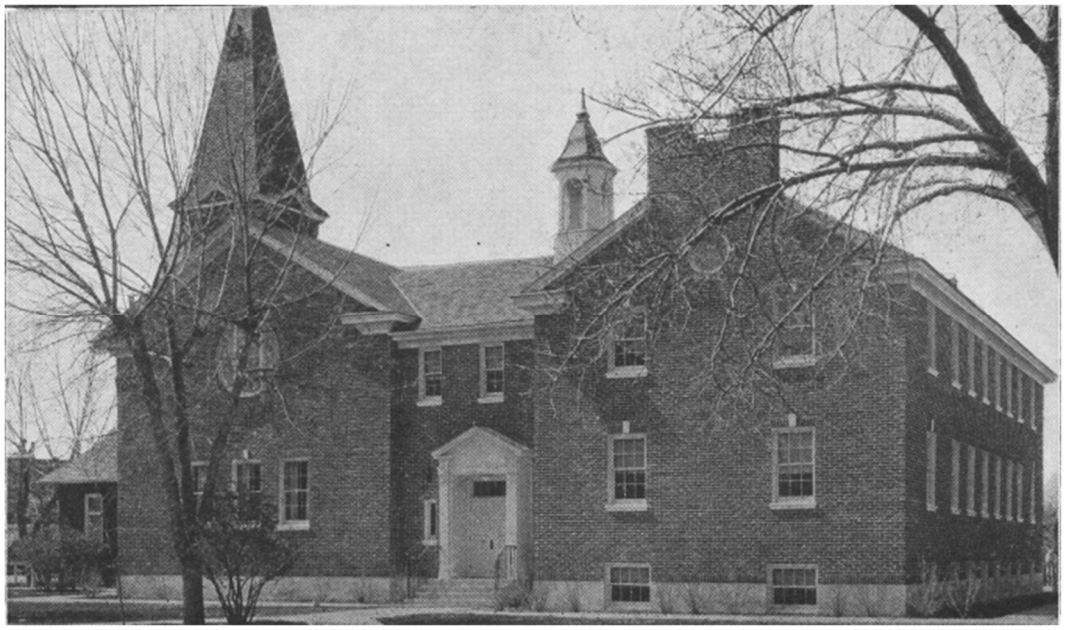
Montana Plumbing, Heating & Engineering Co.
114 North 26th Street
BETTER PLUMBING FOR LESS

Billings Sash & Door Co.
20th Street and Second Avenue North
EVERYTHING IN MILLWORK
Mantels - Stairs - Windows - Doors
Trim - Cabinets

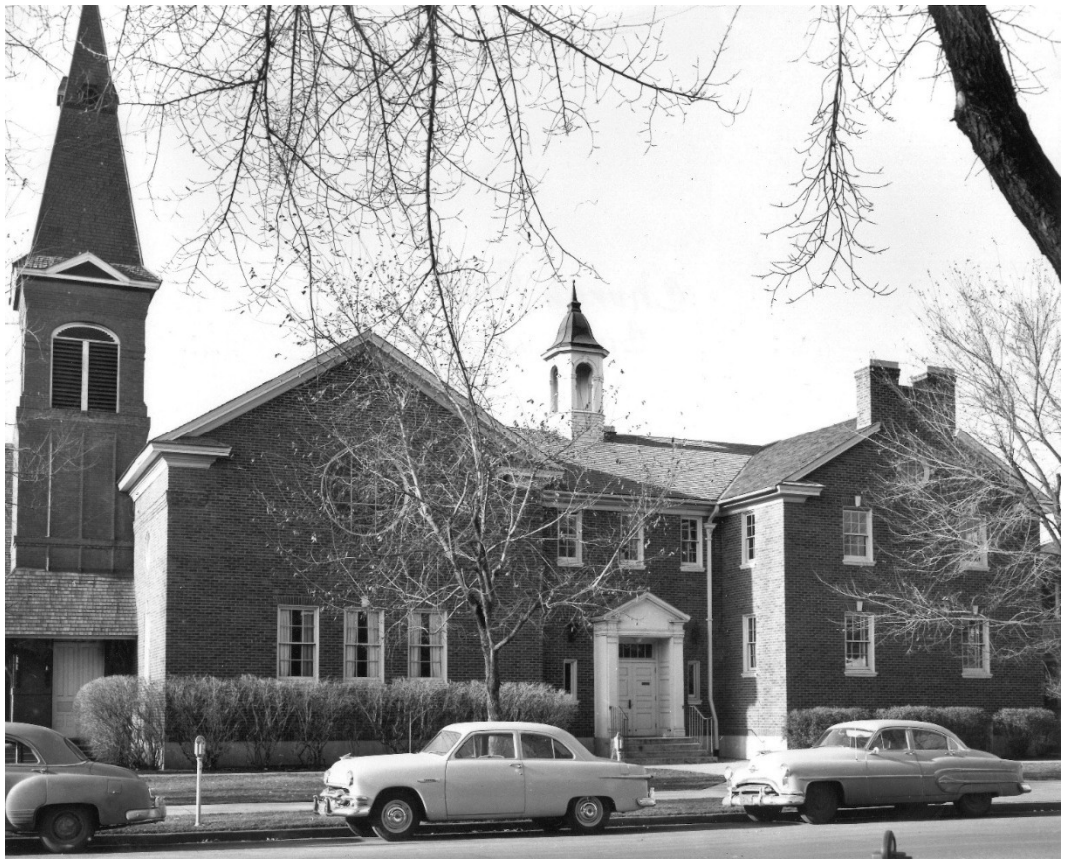
Central Cornice Co.
187 North 29th Street
Installed the Modern Heating System

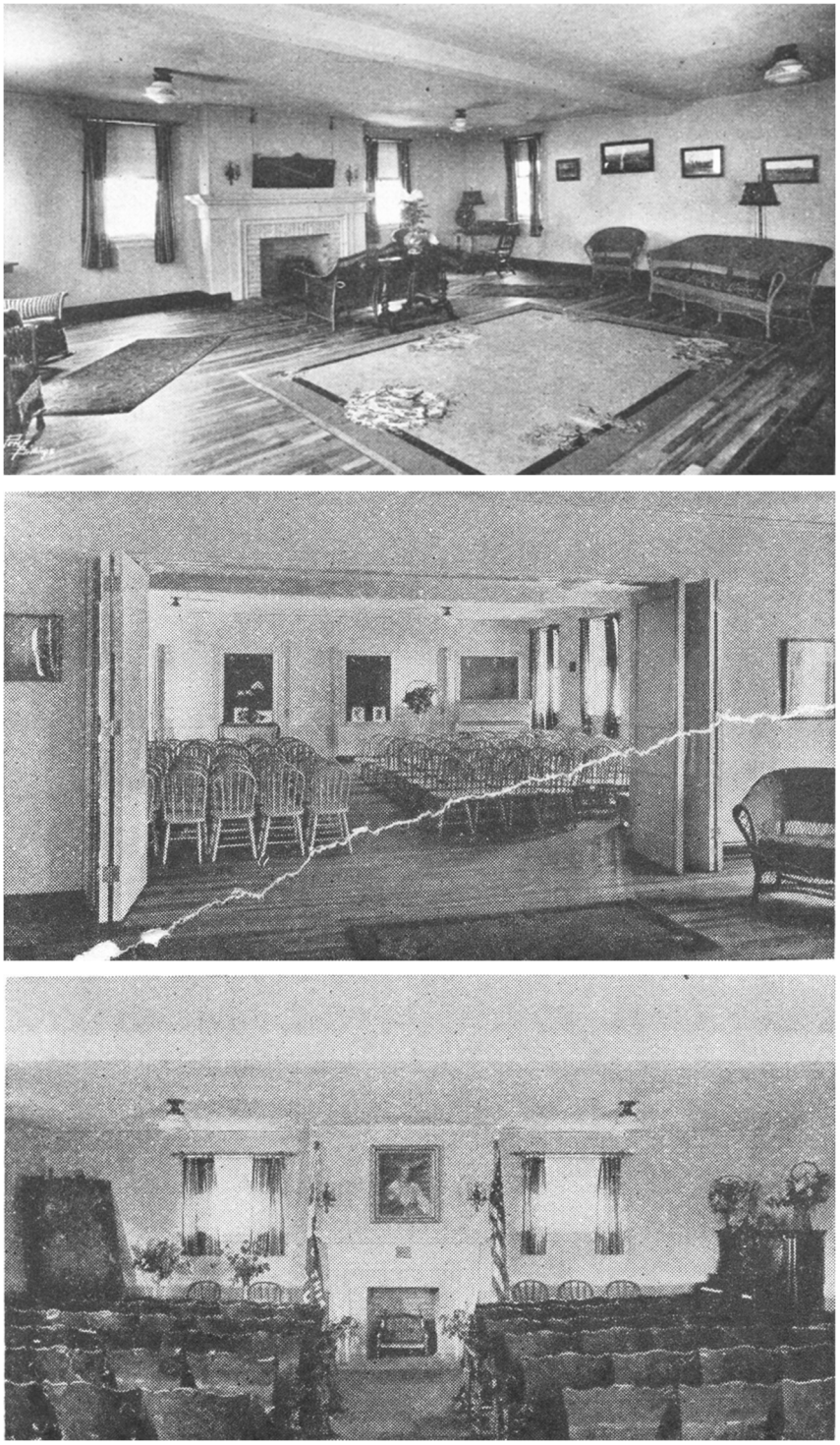
Gagnon & Company
201 North 21st Street
GENERAL CONTRACTORS

An invitation to the community to tour the newly completed parish house, published in the *Billings Gazette* on February 12, 1928. The *Billings Gazette* reported in the days that followed that 3,000 visitors toured the new edifice during the open house and 280 attended the first meal served in the parish house dining room.



Views of the 1928 Colonial Revival-style addition to the 1883 church that included the parish house on the right. Photos courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.





The parlor and assembly room on the first floor of the parish house and a room in the basement used for Sunday school and youth activities, as depicted in a 1929 church bulletin, entitled *First Congregational Church: The Pioneer Church of Billings*. Courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Boy Scout Troop 2, pictured in front of the church in 1932, is the oldest active Boy Scout troop in Montana. The church has sponsored the troop since it was chartered in 1916. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Billings cub scout packs met at the First Congregational Church to reenact King Arthur's court and receive advancement awards. According to a *Billings Gazette* article, dated January 29, 1950, the cub scouts were observing King Arthur Month with themed activities to "strengthen the arm of liberty." Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Church Council dinner in the parish house dining room in 1942. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

The parish house kitchen after an evening event, c. 1954. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Meeting in the parish house parlor, c. 1950s.
Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

The postwar surge in church enrollment led to overcrowded conditions in the parish house's Sunday school classrooms which ultimately necessitated the construction of a three-level education wing in 1951. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Steel Erected in Church Unit

The R. I. Reidesel Construction company is erecting steel for a T-styled addition to the west side of the First Congregational church, designed to double existing floor space. The estimated $110,000 cost of the project was raised through member subscription.

Construction of the church's education wing was one of several major building and expansion projects featured in the *Billings Gazette* on February 25, 1951.

The education wing, completed in 1951, added two large assembly rooms, ten classrooms, preschool rooms and a nursery to accommodate the growing number of children attending Christian education classes and activities at the church. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

The nursery and a spacious, well-appointed Sunday school room in the new education wing, c. 1957. Photos courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Photographer Earnest E. Scowcroft captured these scenes during construction of the new church in 1956. The upper photo features a view to the northeast facing onto the historic Billings Chamber of Commerce Building, and the lower photo offers a view of the parish house to the north. Photos courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

One of the wants of the town is a good bell, so that some standard time could be kept and more prompt attendance secured at church, school and other public assemblages. At present everyone is a rule unto himself, as regards time, and confusion is sometimes the result. The Congregational congregation talk of starting in to raise funds to procure a bell, and if a start were made, we feel sure the general public would give liberally towards this desirable project. An arrangement doubtless could be made by which such a bell could be utilized for town purposes. In the meantime it has been suggested that the whistle at the N. P. workships should be used as the standard time toa this town. If this were done, greater punctuality would be secured in the attendance at all meetings and a good deal of valuable time saved.

A request for a bell for town purposes, published in the *Billings Gazette* on November 10, 1883.

In 1889, a 1,028-pound church bell, forged by the Clinton H. Meneely Bell Company of Troy, New York, was mounted in the steeple. This photo of the church bell was taken in 2024 by church historian Nathan Sonnenschein.

The placing of the bell from the old church into the new belltower on April 8, 1957. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Laying the cornerstone of the new church on May 26, 1957, during the church's 75th anniversary diamond jubilee celebration. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Parishioners exit the newly completed church after Sunday service in 1957. Photos courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

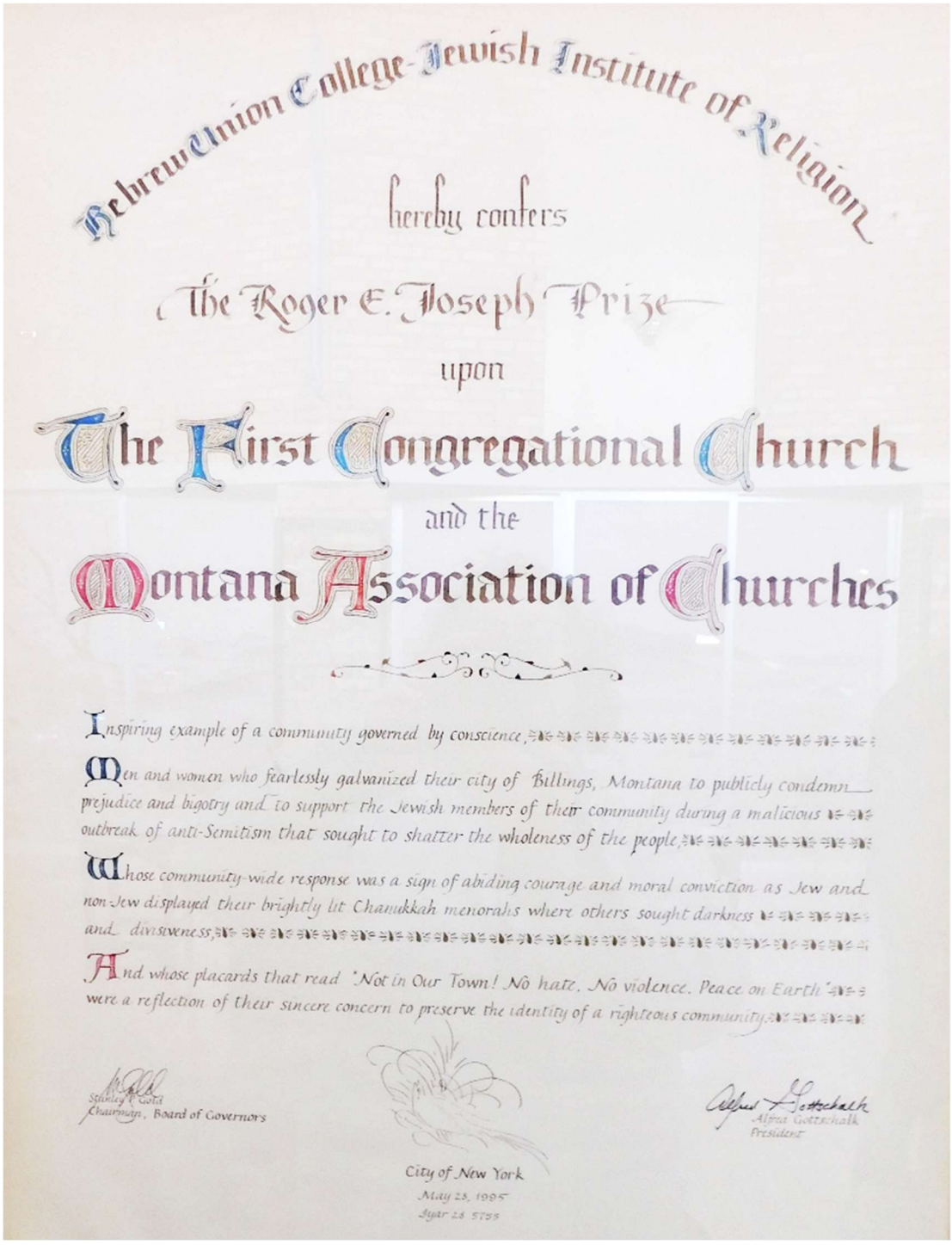
A view of the sanctuary from the balcony of the new church in 1957. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Parishioners visit in the narthex after Sunday service, c. 1957. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Parishioners dine in the Fellowship Hall in the basement of the new church, date unknown. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

Members of the Women's Fellowship, formerly the Ladies' Aid Society, sort clothing donations in the narthex in 1965. Photo courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.

According to the bulletin from its rededication service, a 32-rank, three-division Holtkamp organ replaced the church's original Moller pipe organ in 1973. The organ was expanded to 44 ranks and four divisions in 1982. Photos courtesy of Billings First Congregational Church.


Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
hereby confers
The Roger E. Joseph Prize
upon
The First Congregational Church
and the
Montana Association of Churches
Inspiring example of a community governed by conscience,
Men and women who fearlessly galvanized their city of Billings, Montana to publicly condemn prejudice and bigotry and to support the Jewish members of their community during a malicious outbreak of anti-Semitism that sought to shatter the wholeness of the people,
Whose community-wide response was a sign of abiding courage and moral conviction as Jew and non-Jew displayed their brightly lit Chanukkah menorahs where others sought darkness and divisiveness,
And whose placards that read "Not in Our Town! No hate. No violence. Peace on Earth" were a reflection of their sincere concern to preserve the identity of a righteous community,
Stanley P. Gold
Chairman, Board of Governors
Alfred Gottschalk
Alfred Gottschalk
President
City of New York
May 23, 1995
Iyar 28 5755

The Jewish Institute of Religion of New York's Hebrew Union College conferred upon the First Congregational Church and the Montana Association of Churches the Roger E. Joseph Prize in May 1995 for galvanizing the community to stand up against anti-Semitic hate crimes.

National Register Photographs

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0001
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: July 4, 2025
Description of Photograph: East elevation of the 1957 church, narthex, and administration offices and the 1928 parish house; view to the southwest.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0002
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: July 4, 2025
Description of Photograph: South and east elevations; view to the west.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0003
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Lillian Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: April 5, 2025
Description of Photograph: West and south elevations edged by the Intertribal Community Park; view to the north.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0004
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: July 5, 2025
Description of Photograph: Closeup of mixed media sculptures — *Peace, Comfort, Rest,* and *Ease* — by artist Sherri Cornett installed in the church's Intertribal Community Park, a park that was dedicated in 2020; noncontributing site; view to the southwest.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0005
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Lillian Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: April 5, 2025
Description of Photograph: East elevation of 1928 parish house; view to the southwest.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0006
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: July 4, 2025
Description of Photograph: North and east elevations of the 1928 parish house and 1951 education wing with Shuart Memorial Park in the foreground; view to the south.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0007
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Lillian Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: April 5, 2025
Description of Photograph: East elevation of the 1951 education wing with Shuart Memorial Park in the foreground; noncontributing utility shed in the background; view to the west.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0008
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Lillian Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: April 5, 2025
Description of Photograph: West elevation of 1957 church addition and 1951 education wing; view to the northwest.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0009

Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: Interior view of the sanctuary from the balcony; view to the southwest.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0010
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: Interior view of the altar, reredos, and chancel flanked by the pipe organ cages; view to the southwest.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0011
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: Stained-glass windows in the east wall of the chapel at the rear of the sanctuary, crafted by Kennedy's Stained Glass and installed in 1985; view to the northeast.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0012
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: Stained-glass windows in the balcony of the sanctuary, crafted by Kennedy's Stained Glass and installed in 1985; view to the northeast.

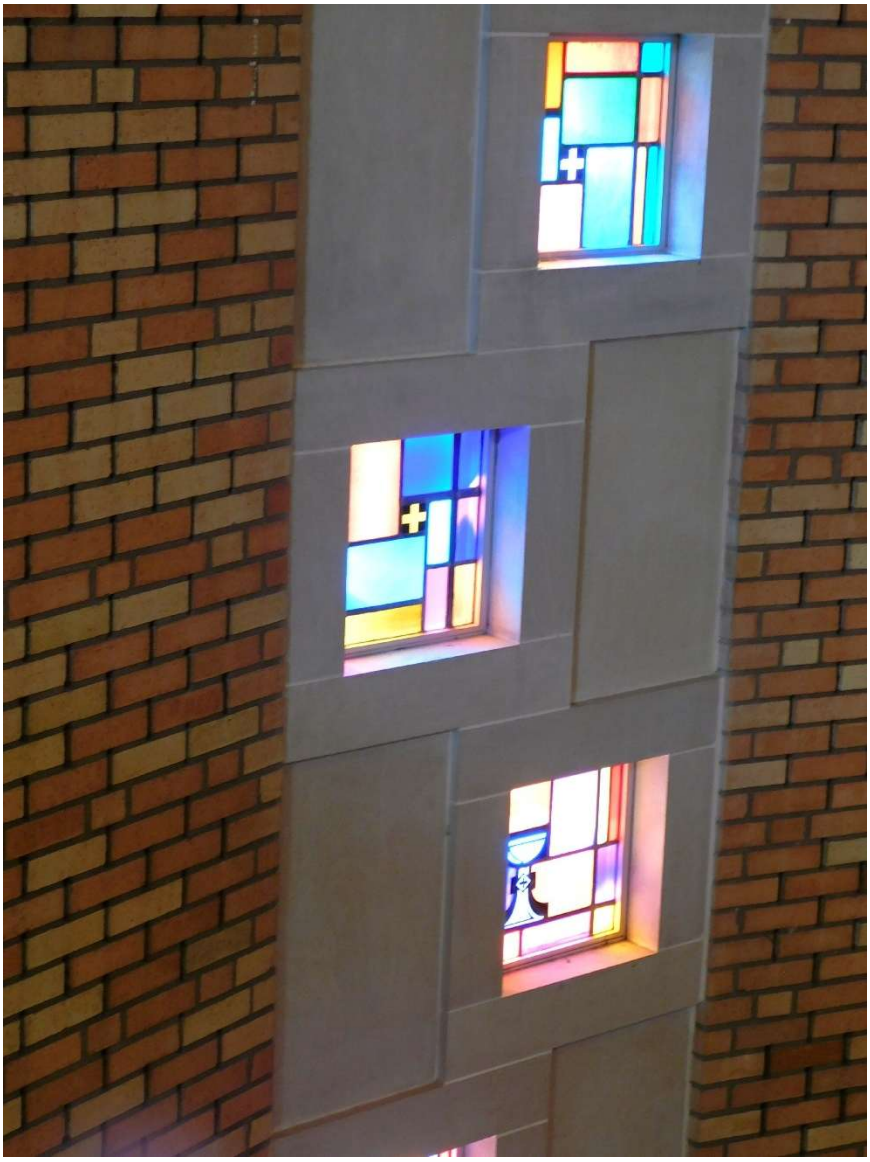


Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0013
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: Vertical course of geometric stained-glass windows, crafted by Judson Studios of Los Angeles, on the south wall of the sanctuary; view to the southeast.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0014
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: Interior view of the narthex with etched glass sliding doors depicting the Garden of Gethsemane, created by artist Larry Burton and installed in 2005; view to the southwest.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0015
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: The Pioneer Memorial Window, designed after western artist J.K. Ralston's painting *Sunshine Worship on the Trail*, was relocated from the old church to the new church and installed on the east wall of the narthex above the entrance; view to the northeast.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0016
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Nathan Sonnenschein
Date Photographed: July 5, 2025
Description of Photograph: Interior view of Fellowship Hall in the basement of the 1957 church addition; view to the northeast.

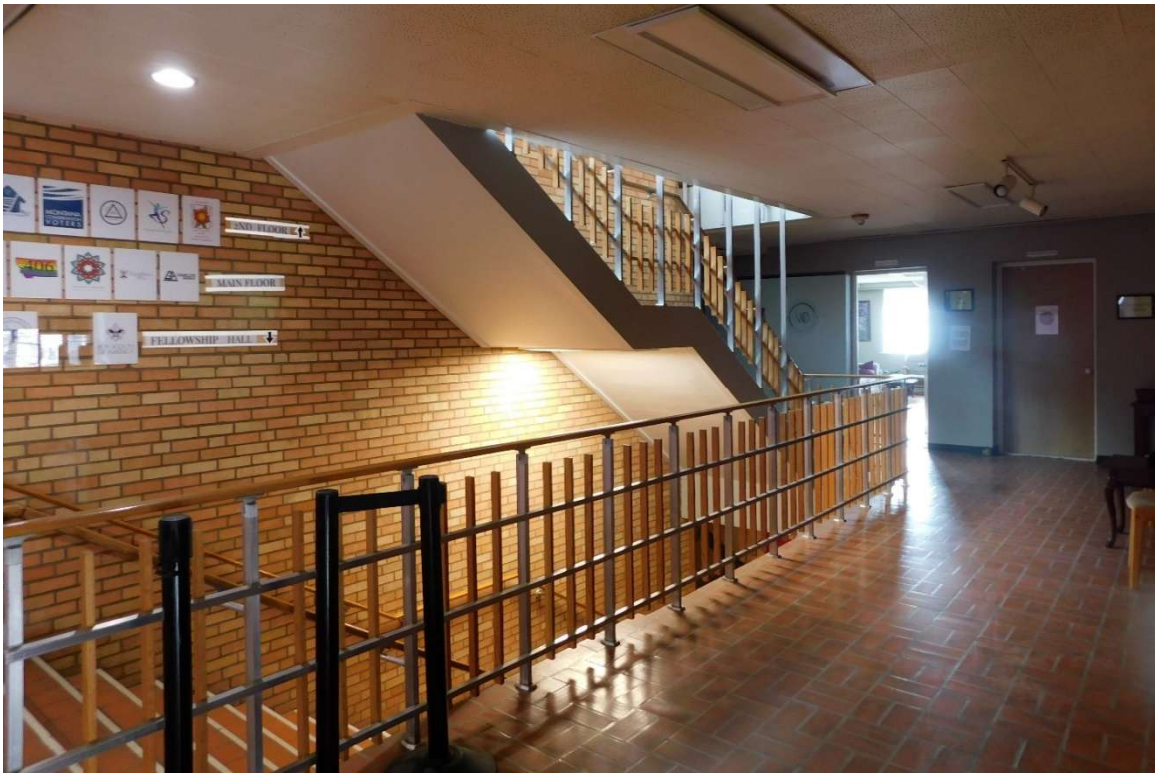


Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0017
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: Interior view of hallway connecting the narthex to the parish house; view to the northwest.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0018
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Nathan Sonnenschein
Date Photographed: July 5, 2025
Description of Photograph: Interior view of the parish house parlor; view to the east.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0019
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: Interior view of the original folding doors separating the parlor and library on the first floor of the parish house; view to the northwest.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_0020
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: Interior view of the second-floor parish house kitchen; view to the northwest.

Photo MT_YellowstoneCounty_BillingsFirstCongregationalChurch_021
Name of Property: Billings First Congregational Church
Location: Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana
Photographer: Ann Kooistra-Manning
Date Photographed: February 22, 2025
Description of Photograph: Interior view of the History Room in the lower level of the parish house that exhibits a collection of historical church furnishings, artifacts, and photographs; view to the west.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.
Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
Tier 2 – 120 hours
Tier 3 – 230 hours
Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.